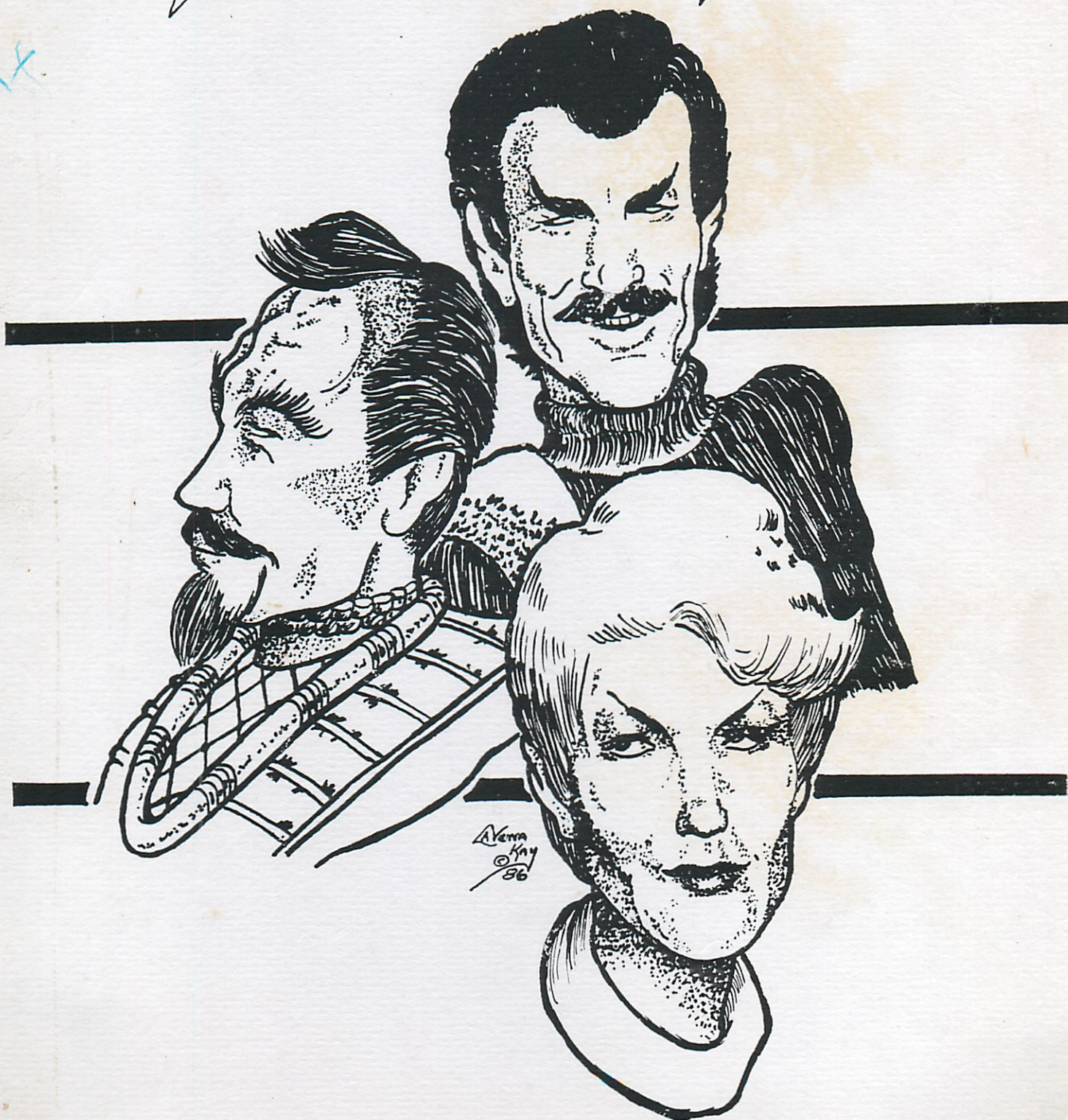


TREKISM At Length VII





TREKisM at Length VI

Editor
Contributing Editor

Vel Jaeger
Kim Knapp

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TrekisM at Length is published at 1324 Stratford Dr, Clearwater FL 34616 U.S.A.



DEDICATION

To the crew of the space shuttle Challenger:

Gregory Jarvis
Sharon Crista McAuliffe
Ronald E. McNair
Ellison S. Onizuka
Judith A. Resnik
Frances R. (Dick) Scobee
Michael J. Smith

We who hold hope for the future of mankind
among the stars of the twenty-third century
must not forget the pioneers of our own century.
We owe our future to the sacrifices of these courageous volunteers,
and weep for their families and friends left behind.

Eternal Father, strong to save,
Whose arm hath bound the restless wave,
Who bidd'st the mighty ocean deep
Its own appointed limits keep,
O hear us when we cry to thee
For those in peril on the sea!

Lord, guard and guide the men who fly
Through the great spaces in the sky.
Be with them always in the air,
In darkening storms or sunlight fair.
O hear us when we lift our prayer
For those in peril in the air!

-- from "The Navy Hymn"

"The courage of these people who go into space is thrilling
to us because we always know -- without thinking about it --
the dangers they are chancing. But the courage is real
because the dangers are real. Because they've all gone so well,
we try to forget that they are risking their lives.
Now we can't."

William Shatner, USA Today, January 29, 1986







Table of Contents

<u>PAGE</u>	<u>TITLE/AUTHOR</u>
1.	THE WINE OF ASTONISHMENT by Kim Knapp
43.	PORTFOLIO: Prelude to the Eternal Loser -- Art & Poetry by Vel Jaeger
45.	..... "Early Harvest"
46.	..... "Visionary"
49.	..... "Crysalis"
50.	..... "Alpha Quest"
52.	TECHNICALLY SPEAKING by Peter Scott)
	(compiled from columns which originally appeared in TREKisM's 32-4,36-7,41-4)
65.	TreKomedY Korner by Elliot Miller and Louis Rakita
	(compiled from columns which originally appeared in TREKisM's 28-31,36-44)
66.	..... "Episodes that Never Quite Made It
72.	..... "Did You Ever Wonder --"
	..... Trekwiz I
74.	..... Trekwiz II
76.	..... The "Now I've Heard Everything" Quiz
	..... World's Hardest Trekwiz I
78.	..... World's Hardest Trekwiz II
	..... World's Easiest Trekwiz I
79.	..... World's Easiest Trekwiz II
80.	PRIVATE PLEASURES by Deborah Goby
81.	THE EVILS THAT MEN DO by Isabell Klein
120.	MIND-SLAVE by Anne B. Collins, D.V.M.
126.	PORTFOLIO: Art & Poetry by Vel Jaeger
	(poetry originally appeared in VOICES TO THE STARS, Nancy Gervais, Ed)
	..... "An Endless Presence"
129.	..... "A Mortal Stumble"
130.	..... "When Only Anger Reigns"
132.	TIME IN TWO by Barbara J. Yanosko -- art by LaVena Kay Kidd
133.	RELICS by Deborah Goby
	(originally appeared in TREKisM #43)

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EDITORIAL RAMBLINGS

For all of you who are surprised at the sudden appearance of TaL VI so quickly on the heels of TaL V -- so are we! Basically, this is an overflow issue -- first we received Barb Yanosko's novella, then Kim's long story was finalized almost simultaneously, and all the while Isabell's prolific pen never faltered -- *voila!* another zine is born. And thanks to Isabell doing double duty at the word processor, we're actually keeping to a schedule. (I'm convinced she types in her sleep!) We hadn't intended to keep this zine a secret, it just sort of materialized in our mailbox. So, keep 'em coming -- let's see how fast we can full up TaL VIII. No, we're not skipping # VII -- that one will be a retrospective of Karen Hunter's stories.

NEW ADDRESSES: Please note that after MARCH 1, 1986, I'll be in Florida. Send your manuscripts to me at 2684 Main Street, Clearwater, FL 33519; phone (813) 797-0561. After all, I'll need something to read at the beach. As before, any matters involving money (zine orders, back issues, etc.) should be sent to Kim Knapp (her address is on the title page); some time in March it will be changing to one in Washington State.

A WORD OF CAUTION: Some stories in this issue are rather more graphic in detail than is usual for TaL -- if this zine were a movie, we'd rate it PG-13. Or to use the Klein Scale, if your grandmother were to read this zine to your seven-year-old child, one or both might get upset or embarrassed. But we think the content is relatively mild in comparison to your average rock video, and doubt that our readers will have any real complaints.



Vel Jaeger

... And you thought the hard luck story was over once we got TAL 5 in print! After I got in a smack-up with Vel's Pacer, my car was back to the shop (it took three tries for the poor transmission man to get it right). So while driving Vel's beautiful Celica on my lunch hour, the other driver (yes, another one) developed a sudden case of total blindness, because after she stopped at a sign, she drove straight forward into Vel's front end. I wouldn't have blamed Vel if she never spoke to me again...

But she got her revenge. Finally got my car back on Christmas eve, and in January, the computer at work started doing funny things about the same time that my engine started making funny noises. Since I'm the one who knows the most about this thing, I couldn't get time off to see a mechanic--so the same day that the computer lost its mind (and complete memory of everything we've done in the last two years) Vel drove my car to lunch -- and fate struck again. The timing chain broke, timing went off, and the valves and pistons all tried to be in the same place at the same time. Poof! Engine, gone. (It's so depressing to go over this again.)

My signature alone is worth *nothing*, so when the spouse returned from Japan, we went and bought a new car. Maybe the bad luck is over at last...

If Vel is going to be reading on the beach, I guess I'll be banking in the rain, since six weeks of sunshine in Washington causes a drought and has the authorities howling for water conservation. We'll be notifying everyone on the mailing list of both new addresses once I get mine (hopefully there'll be housing waiting for us, if not we go hunting) finalized.

Lastly, I have to thank Alan and Margie Czuprinski for technical information (medical and such) which made a few details in my story most accurate. We'll miss you when you're in Japan!



Kim Knapp



The Wine of Astonishment

by
Kim
Knapp

Sylvia kicked at a rock, wishing passionately that she wasn't the beneficiary of so much bad luck. How could it get worse? she wondered, then quickly suppressed the thought. She had discovered that if the question was asked, the situation generally got worse. She glared around her at the lush forest surrounding the fallen log she sat on. The place was beautiful, but she was used to civilization. Early rustic was not her idea of fun.

Only yesterday, she reflected, she had been one of several hundred beings on a commuter ship, traveling between two heavily populated systems in the Eridani sector. One minute she'd been reading, the next, scrambling reflexively for the escape pods as the alarms hooted the imminent danger of explosion. She was accustomed to surviving several practice drills during such runs -- any passenger who failed to respond was either publicly humiliated or fined. But this one had been real, and Sylvia hadn't even had time to look at her fellow passengers before the statis field activated itself. The statis field was a new, controversial system designed to lower the high mortality rate by starvation or suffocation of those who did survive to reach the escape pods. Opponents, who were concerned over the effects on family structures, were quickly silenced when asked to provide alternatives.

The only problem from the passengers' point of view was that the statis field was not announced before it was activated. The panic some beings experienced altered bodily chemicals, causing fatalities to the initial exposure of the ray.

So for all of them, the 'yesterday' was subjective. She had awakened slowly, tried to stretch, and had received an elbow in the face for her efforts. Until the hatch had been opened and the confusion sorted out, her nose had bled profusely.

She did not have to look over her shoulder to realize that the discussion that had been going on for some time was erupting into an argument. The voices had risen slowly, except for the Vulcan's. She smiled slightly. She had seen almost immediately that his calmness had exasperated some of the others' fiery tempers.

The disputed point was their rescue: was it near, or in the distant future? Ballinger, an energetic man in his sixties, felt it would be soon — weeks at the most. Thonar, a rather hostile Andorian, sided with him, as did Donner, a supercilious, thin man in his thirties. Joel, an over-active twelve-year-old, held no opinion, nor did Madame Lancaster, a frail old woman. Sylvia still wonder how the old woman had managed to gain entrance to the pod or survive the statis.

Holding the field against all comers was Seral, the Vulcan. His black hair was beginning to gray, but he was as stolid and imposing as any brick wall Sylvia had ever seen. He firmly maintained that the camp should be made permanent, since both the distress beacon and the navi-computer were presently inoperable. There was no way, he stated firmly, to determine their location until the night sky was visible. And the pod's limited computer could give him no information yet on how long they had been held in statis.

Sylvia didn't really have an opinion either way. She knew only that she didn't want to stay here. She knew well how she fit into her world, her job, her small circle of friends. This situation was too new and abrupt, and the fears and insecurities she'd hidden long ago had begun to resurface, and were yammering at her underneath the voices she heard rising and falling in endless discussion.

A shrill whistle drew her attention and quieted the others. It was Joel, standing above them, disgust on his face. "Even I know the answer to this one," he said contemptuously. "Set up a temporary camp with the pod supplies, then scout and plan a permanent one. If we're rescued soon, at least we've been busy. If not, we have a good place to live until someone does come."

"Besides," he shouted over the babble of voices that began immediately when he paused for breath, "It's almost nightfall and I don't want to sleep on the grass!"

Sylvia, imagining countless unknown insects and small reptiles scurrying under their clothes, shuddered. Somehow, miraculously, the others agreed, and the supplies were pulled from the pod and organized. An eterno-lamp was hung from a conveniently located central tree branch, and each individual picked an area for his or her shelter.

It was discovered long ago that cramming strangers into one large area for sleeping tended to set them at each other's throats. So smaller shelters had been designed, each able to adjust to any temperature desired, giving individuals their needed privacy. It was an unspoken rule that no one's shelter was entered without permission.

The small structures were set up in a semi-circle, and a larger facility, designed for families, or multiple-awareness beings, was set up some distance across the clearing, roughly completing the circle. Behind the large shelter, designated the common room, was set the standard waste eliminator. Its small power pack allowed them to not worry about how their bodily wastes might affect the new environment. Few survivors give it much thought.

Seral passed out the tasteless ration bars, commenting only that they would have to find an alternative food source soon. Sylvia sat on an air-pillow and munched her bar, eyeing her fellows carefully. What sort of companions would they make, for a short or a long time?

Evidently Ballinger was thinking along the same lines. He stood up, brushed the crumbs off his fingers, and took a position in the shelter where everyone could see him.

"Fellow — uh, beings," he said, "we don't know how long we'll be here. Rescue could come tomorrow, in which case you won't care. But I think we ought to get to know each other a bit better." Silence, which he evidently took for assent, answered his pause.

"Well. I'll start. My name's Olon Ballinger, I'm sixty-four, married, and I head a large corporation that designs and builds mining equipment to varied specifications." He looked around. "Who's next?" Thonar, at his left, looked around for a moment before he realized that he was apparently it. "I am of Andor,"

he said softly in the almost-lisp that characterized Andorian use of Basic English. "I am a chemist, and I am wed in clan custom." He glared angrily at Ballinger, perhaps, Sylvia thought, for putting him on the spot.

Joel scooted forward on his cushion, all arms and legs and thick shock of brown hair. "Joel Hardesty," he announced cheerfully, "still deciding on everything else. And what a thing to happen on my first inter-system trip!"

Mrs. Lancaster, seated next to Joel, smiled sweetly. She was the "little oldster from Rigel" that used aircar dealers spoke of, thought Sylvia. Her hair was white and curled tightly, her skin hung baggily over her frail structure, and she wore a plain and outdated style of tunic in a sober brown color. "Never ask a lady her age," she stated primly, "but I am a retired educational consultant. Never married, only a few short-term contracts. I taught small children, so I'm afraid I haven't any information that might help here. But it is so exciting!"

Sylvia dropped her eyes when everyone looked at her. "Sylvia Collins," she offered shortly. "I'm twenty-six, single, and an intercompany courier for an electronics firm." Trying to divert attention from herself, she looked pointedly at Donner.

The thin man threw her a dirty look. "Joris Donner," he mumbled. "I am a priest-leader of the Darnelius colony. I am thirty-six, and was on a trip to order certain supplies for my group." He glared at Sylvia again. "We live as is our custom," he snapped.

A recent news article moved to the top of Sylvia's memory, explaining Donner's hostility. The Darnelius colony was settled by a religious group that completely segregated the sexes, except for their highly ritualized ceremonies and specific times for procreation. Marriages were multiple — but a woman who did not conceive after six attempts was divorced. Sylvia eyed him curiously. He probably thought she should live apart from the rest of the community.

Seral, unlike the others, did not move before he spoke. "I am Vulcan, my occupation is that of Healer, specializing in non-Vulcan species. I am 127.3 years old, in Standard reckoning."

Ballinger stared at him for a minute. "You married?" he demanded rudely.

Seral returned his gaze evenly. "My bondmate died four-point-seven years ago," he replied.

While the others were watching this interplay, Sylvia casually crossed her arms over her middle and leaned over slightly, pressing inward. Good, she hadn't lost her packet. She never knew exactly what she carried, but it could be important.

"Are you all right?" Joel asked, and Ballinger moved to crouch in front of her, questions in his eyes.

"Just — not used to the emergency rations," she fabricated. "I — think I'd like to get some sleep."

"Good idea," the man agreed, and stood, joining Donner by the entryway. As Sylvia approached the door, the priest-leader drew back pointedly. She ignored it, but realized that he could not be counted friendly.

Sylvia had set up her shelter at the far right of the semi-circle, and she crawled inside and gratefully opaqued the walls. It was bad enough to be marooned; this crowd could make it a definite hardship to remain rational. She secured the door flap, stripped off her outer tunic and skirt, and examined the packet.

It was fastened to her skin, a soft, flexible layer of syntha-skin, with several micro-sized sheets of information underneath. Only on close examination — and in good light — was it visible. Any skilled tech could remove it — but the contents would be destroyed in the process whether she was alive or dead. Only a precise solution could dissolve the "skin" and leave the packet untouched.

What if this is important? she wondered. How many research projects — or unpaid bills — am I holding up by being here? She yawned deeply. It didn't matter. Only here and now was important. Pulling up the featherweight cover to her shoulders, she was almost instantly asleep.

DAY 2

Sounds of...birds. Sylvia sat up, for it was not her usual wake-up. As soon as she recognized her surroundings, she remembered yesterday's events and sighed deeply. For a moment, it had seemed only a dream.

She heard voices conversing quietly outside, but could not determine to whom they belonged. She shook out her tunic and skirt, regarded them sadly, and then dressed and sought the small shelter behind the common room.

Following the voices, Sylvia retraced the path to the pod's location, to find Ballinger and Seral huddled over the computer. Ballinger held a manual and referred to it constantly, reciting instructions. But from the set of the Vulcan's head, Sylvia guessed that he was working from his own knowledge, and tuning Ballinger out.

"Greetings," Ballinger announced when he finally noticed her. "You're up early — sun's only been up an hour."

Sylvia pushed the hair out of her eyes. "No wonder," she replied groggily. "I hate mornings. What are you doing?"

"Trying to find out where we are, and how long it was," Ballinger replied then turned back to peer over Seral's shoulder. "Anything yet?"

"I believe I would be able to obtain the information if you would release control of the scanning system," Seral replied calmly.

Ballinger jumped as if shocked, then stepped out of the pod to give the Vulcan room to work. Seral pried a panel loose and fiddled with the interior, then turned back to the panel he'd been facing before. He leaned over the scanner and stared into it for a moment, then straightened and turned toward the doorway.

"Well?" Ballinger demanded. "What did you find out?"

"Perhaps we should gather the others..." Seral began.

"If we know in advance, we can be prepared for anyone who gets too — upset," Ballinger broke in. Sylvia suppressed a smile: he just wanted to be the first to know.

"Very well," Seral agreed. "The navigational computer managed to repair itself but lost some of its memory. Apparently we went in a random direction until the computer found a suitable location for us. We were in stasis for 6.47 years."

Ballinger's jaw dropped; Sylvia gasped. "I have not yet determined our location," Seral continued, as if unaware of the bombshell he had dropped. "The computer apparently lost more records as we were landing, and I am not a navigator. I do not recognize the stars I saw in the night sky."

He looked from Ballinger to Sylvia, who stared at him, unmoving. How could he be so calm? But — Vulcans suppressed emotion. Or else they didn't have any; she wasn't quite sure which. Suddenly, realizing she was still meeting his gaze, she flushed and looked away.

"We should...tell the others," Ballinger murmured. "I'll go get them together."

Sylvia was staring into the trees, trying to control the feelings of confusion and loss that threatened to overwhelm her.

"Is there — a source of water nearby?" she asked, and was relieved when her voice did not tremble or crack.

Seral walked to stand beside her, pointing in the direction she was staring. "Three hundred meters," he said, and Sylvia realized that he was watching her intently.

"I — guess I'll take a walk," she said, and set out toward the water, not looking back. She walked rapidly, concentrating only on the soft grass under her sandalled feet, until she came to a softly chuckling stream. A large, flat rock a short way downstream seemed appropriate, and Sylvia pulled off her tunic and rinsed out the encrusted blood that had clung to the material. Her nose still smarted at the memory.

She spread the clean tunic flat on the rock, then regarded the water. Its rush and flow was soothing, especially as she began to realize that she had slept away six and a half years. Her friends' ages did not particularly matter, but such relationships were hard to resume after such a time. And her job — her few valued possessions — what had become of them? Was there anyone who would care enough for her to put her things into storage? Or would the owner of her rental merely take them against the unpaid lease? Sylvia shook herself. This was silly. Whatever had happened could not be changed, and had happened years ago.

Current survival must now be faced, and for an indefinite length of time. Why, then, did her mind continue to dwell on what must be long past, and yet felt so recent? Perhaps because she had not really accepted, deep inside, that the time had passed and there would be such changes. It was too soon. Sylvia hugged her knees to her chest, feeling the slight stiffness of the packet, and was somehow relieved. Surely the information she carried would be enough to guarantee her a place in whatever world she would eventually return to.

Checking the tunic, Sylvia found it nearly dry, and pulled it over her head, but made no move to return to the campsite. She was unable to muster any optimism about a possible rescue. But she could not see herself and the others making a permanent home here — the people were too different, too contradictory. And what choice would she have if — no. She would choose to remain alone rather than to marry any of the men in this company. She was quite sure that Donner despised women. The Andorian had shown only the hostile side of his personality — except for the view of his elbow Sylvia had received as it smacked her face. Joel was a child. Ballinger — he was too much. Too domineering, too jovial, too successful. She could not believe all of that was real. And as for Seral, she felt sure that a Vulcan could have no love for a Human woman — or any woman; how could she marry under those circumstances?

No. If it was a choice between present company or not at all, she would remain single, unless one or more of them changed drastically. And with the presence of Joel and Mrs. Lancaster, she felt she was in no danger of being coerced.

She thought back in time. Only twice in her twenty-six years had she met a man with whom she wanted to spend the rest of her life. But the attraction had not been mutual, and the disappointment had been enough to completely spoil her hopes of ever marrying at all.

Tomas had been tall, attractive — the ideal man always shown in the vid-commercials — and he had romanced her in a whirlwind courtship. When the dust had settled, she was left with an empty bank account and emptier dreams. How could she trust again?

After him had come Bernie, whom she had tried to trust when she found her heart unwillingly committed. He was quiet but self-assured, and though new in the company, he had been good to Sylvia — made her feel whole again, and worthy of value. But once he was promoted into her department he had persuaded her to keep their relationship quiet, so as not to interfere with their work. And he had promptly began wooing the supervisor, getting another promotion, working his magic closer to the management levels of the company. When Sylvia saw that she had been used, she had shut off that part of herself, to escape the pain and humiliation she had felt — still felt. Maybe, she had thought, I brought it on myself. In an attempt to escape the looks and whispers that she imagined must follow her about the company, she had applied for and received the job as a courier — and now spent much of her time on passenger liners, whiling away the hours with reading and occasionally attempting small crafts — but mostly staying alone, protecting herself. She was still convinced, these years later, that she had deserved what had happened, as well as subsequent misfortune — which had been little to speak of until now.

Her friends had seen less of her as she began spending weeks and months away from home, so she found herself a loner. Only a few cared enough to keep in touch and see her when she was groundside awaiting the next courier run.

Sylvia, startled to awareness, realized that someone had come up behind her. She had not heard anything, but sensed a presence, and turned to see Seral, who was watching her carefully. "Are you well?" he asked.

She stood up slowly and brushed off her skirt. "I'm all right," she replied softly. "I guess I had some thinking to do. How are the others taking the news?"

"Mrs. Lancaster has collapsed and is not well. The others have been too concerned about her to have thought the situation through."

Guilt suffused Sylvia. She should have been there — although she was untrained and could not have made a difference. "What can I do to help?" she blurted.

"She is resting quietly," Seral replied. "Only time will tell if she will recover her health."

"You mean she might die?"

"Unknown as yet. The medical supplies on the pod are minimal, and Mrs. Lancaster has a strong shield — she would not let me through until she lost consciousness."

Sylvia puzzled over this remark as she hopped off the rock, picked up her sandals, then promptly forgot it as she wriggled her toes in the grass. "I've always appreciated civilized living, but this grass feels wonderful."

Seral did not speak, but stood waiting patiently until Sylvia began to move back toward the trees, where he fell into step beside her. They made the short trip in silence, Sylvia studying him out of the corner of her eye. She had never worked closely with a Vulcan before, although she had seen them occasionally on commuter ships and less frequently in her employer's building. Everyone, of course, knew of the Vulcan Ambassador, so Sylvia inevitably used Sarek as a measuring stick for Seral.

Height? She couldn't guess. Seral appeared taller, but the newsies did not announce personal statistics. Shoulders somewhat wider, but not by much, and his walk had the looseness of an athlete. His hands were strong, not bland-looking, as were so many of the hands she saw on the commuter. His face, other than his eyebrows and the slight greenish tinge, could have passed for Human — an attractive one, by her standards. High cheekbones, strong jaw and an equally strong, straight nose, silky-looking hair, brown eyes — that were watching her.

Mortification flooded her as she realized that she had been caught staring, and she attempted to simultaneously look away, drop her eyes, and pretend that she hadn't been staring. She promptly walked into a tree.

"I'm sorry," she gasped, catching her breath. Seral tilted his head to one side.

"For what?" he asked. "That you were staring — or that you collided with a tree?"

Sylvia rubbed her nose gingerly. "For both, I guess. I was curious — but didn't mean to be rude —"

"Curiosity is a common trait of most star-faring races," Seral said calmly.

"It is what motivates sentient life to greater heights of discovery and perception."

"I never thought of that," she admitted. Suddenly they heard shouts, and began running the remaining distance to the camp. Joel met them, dancing about anxiously.

"It's Mrs. Lancaster — she's getting all —" He didn't get a chance to finish, the healer immediately disappeared into the woman's shelter. The boy looked at Sylvia. "Did he hit you?"

"Of course not. I — fell." Sylvia could not admit that she'd injured her nose through her own carelessness. At the thought, she crossed her eyes, attempting to look at it. "Ouch —"

"Yep. It's all red and swollen," Joel announced. "Sure looks like he hit you."

"What happened to Mrs. Lancaster?" she asked, trying to divert him.

"I dunno — maybe he'll tell us," Joel replied, as Seral climbed slowly out of the small cubicle. His face was expressionless, set in sterner lines than Sylvia had yet seen.

"She could not have survived a second attack," he said shortly. Sylvia took a deep breath, intending to speak, but let it out when Donner, Ballinger, and Thonar ran into the clearing. They looked at Joel, who shook his head. Seral had moved to the control panel of the shelter, and now caused it to sink and gather tightly about the woman's body. After a moment, it began to heat, and quickly the material consumed itself and its contents, until there was nothing left but a small puff of black dust in the air.

No one spoke while the shelter disintegrated, and now they stood looking at each other awkwardly. Finally, Donner turned and moved toward the common room, mumbling about being hungry.

Nothing was accomplished that day, except perhaps by Seral who worked unceasingly with the pod's computer. As if by common consent, the rest of the group spent their time alone, perhaps considering all the facets of their survival here. An unknown planet would contain unforeseeable hazards, and was well away from any of the varying degrees of civilization each had known.

Sylvia had realized, after much soul-searching, that she must acknowledge the possibility that they would never leave here. Her dislike of the situation didn't matter. If she wanted, she could simply give up and die, but ranting against whatever entities might control such things would not change facts.

She must either work and survive, or refuse and become a burden on the small community. And since she was already the recipient of some hostility from Donner and Thonar (who appeared to hate everyone) she did not want to make the situation any worse.

Seral, somehow responding to the mood of the others, left the ration bars for them in the common room, and did not appear. Each of them, whether by coincidence or design, picked up their meal without seeing anyone else.

Sylvia spent the evening sitting by the stream, listening to the quiet conversation of the water. When the last light of dusk had faded and she could see the small moon of their world edging over the trees, she decided she ought to go back and try to sleep. Her eyes had adjusted as well as they could to the dark, but she kept a cautious hand stretched in front of her, as the moonlight was minimal through the thick growth of trees.

"May I assist you?"

Sylvia jumped, badly shaken, before she recognized Seral's shape in the shadowy gloom. She took a deep breath, trying to slow her pounding heart.

"I — yes. I can hardly see, and all I need now is to get lost." She paused, peering at him in the dark. "Can you see?"

"Adequately. Are you returning to the camp?"

"Yes. I suppose tomorrow we'll have to sit down and hammer out some policy."

"Although I can see no reason for violence, we do need to establish some guidelines. Shall we go?" Sylvia felt warm fingertips touch the back of her arm, and allowed him to guide her through the trees.

Again they traveled in silence, and Sylvia was somehow strangely disappointed when he dropped his hand from her arm as they entered the clearing. She had turned to thank the Vulcan when she caught sight of her shelter and stiffened. "What is it?" Seral breathed.

"I left the flap secured, I know I did — and now it's open," Sylvia hissed.

"Stay here," Seral whispered. He moved to her shelter, and crouched, then was swallowed by the blackness inside. Sylvia did not move, her heart thudding in her throat, until he reappeared and stood up.

"Someone apparently wants something you have," he said quietly. He held the flap open, and Sylvia could see that her blanket and mattress, so neatly folded that morning, had been tossed about, and in some places, torn.

"I didn't...bring anything with me," she said hesitantly. "Just what I'm wearing."

"Did you not say that you were a courier?" he questioned.

"Well, yes, but — I never carry high-security stuff, I'm not trained for it." She crossed her arms and wrapped her fingers around her elbows. "Nothing...anyone would want to steal..."

"Then why entrust it to a courier, and not the regular mails?" the Vulcan persisted.

"I never thought of that," she admitted unhappily. "But — I don't have my packet. It was left behind when we had to abandon the commuter."

"Perhaps you should make that known."

"Well — but if someone's after it, they won't believe me if I say it's lost. And we — I don't even know who it is!" Suddenly uncertain, Sylvia edged slightly away from the healer.

"It is not I," he assured her. "I have no business with such dealings. I am what I have said, nothing more."

"I didn't mean — to imply —" she stammered.

"No apology is necessary. In view of the circumstances, your suspicion is... understandable." He hesitated over the last word, and Sylvia could almost hear the unspoken "— for a Human." She smiled, then hoped it would not be visible in the dark of the night.

"Good night," she said, and slipped into her shelter, fastening the flap behind her.

DAY 3

"We ought to elect a chairman!" Ballinger shouted.

"I will not submit to authority not recognized in my culture," Donner said, his weak chin taking on a stubborn set.

"All right, then, a moderator," Ballinger returned hotly. Sylvia could already see that there was no authority here but what they set up, and she recognized the uselessness of arguing with the man. Ballinger continued. "We've all finally seen that we could die here — possibly of old age. We need to start making plans — finding things we can eat — finding out what the climate cycle of this planet is. We could be in for one hell of a winter!"

"We need to plan for more permanent shelters," Thonar said. "These shelters will not stand up to high winds or continuous heavy rainfall."

"We also have to find out if we're in the beginning or the end of a growing season — and raise crops we can store," Donner interjected. "If we're close to this alleged winter, we could starve."

"We ought to send out a survey party, but leave some of us here in case the distress call gets answered," Ballinger said. Sylvia noted humorously that without ever calling for a vote, he had managed to emerge as moderator — and perhaps "chairman" as well.

"The Vulcan knows the computer — leave him here with the woman and child," Thonar lisped. "We three shall survey — for a permanent base site and foodstuffs. The meteorological readings can be taken from here."

Surprisingly, it was agreed upon although Sylvia could not see Ballinger's reason for accompanying the survey party — except perhaps for his need to be in charge of things.

DAY 4

Equipment was doled out, advice taken, food rationed, and the party set out early the next day. Sylvia had not been closely involved in their quietly serious departure; she had begun to feel more and more an extra appendage. She was not asked to join the survey group. (Nor had Seral offered to instruct her on the pod's

computer system, saving that place for Joel.) And, since they were still on emergency rations, she hadn't even the menial position of cook. Of course, she told herself, once they find food, I'll get that job. I'll probably end up with all the dirty work in this camp. We'll be getting back to our forebears' eighteenth century stuff — woman as the second-class citizen.

Piqued at the thought, she grabbed a ration bar for her lunch and set out downstream, in the opposite direction from that the surveyors had taken. She was not looking for anything specific, but she kept her eyes open, and just after midday she reached the edge — or one edge — of the forest. In front of her, grass-like plants covered a long, flat plain, which eventually sloped into gently rolling hills at the horizon. A patch of gold caught her eye, and Sylvia left the stream bank to pursue it.

It was a wild grain, growing in a small patch. She knew that Seral would want to examine the plant, so she broke off a handful of stalks and tucked them into her pocket. And when she looked around again, she saw other patches of the grain growing among the taller grasses, making a random patchwork pattern all the way to the hills.

A soft chitter caught her attention, and she looked up to see a small, long-haired creature regarding her from a tree branch. It looked somewhat like a Terran squirrel, but the fur was probably four inches long, a pale brown in color. The creature had two huge eyes that stared at her steadily, and what appeared to be a vertical slit beneath them. Moving slowly, Sylvia tossed the creature the last small bite of her ration, which it caught gracefully. Long fingers on the paws turned it over carefully, the vertical slit twitched slightly, and then opened, the morsel disappearing inside. It chewed side to side, rather than up and down, then crossed its paws across its middle and chattered again.

"That was the last," Sylvia whispered, and spread her empty hands. The animal vanished into the trees, but gave the girl what sounded like a severe scolding as it went. Smiling, somewhat relaxed, Sylvia headed back to camp.

It was after sunset when she reached the flat rock she'd used as a landmark, and Sylvia thought longingly of the cool water on her swollen feet. But she remembered that she had told no one of her departure, and guessed that Joel would probably be frantic. She returned reluctantly to camp.

It was quite empty, and Sylvia's previous depression began to nudge at her until she heard voices. She walked to the pod, making some attempt at silence. Joel and Seral were discussing the pod's computer, and from what little Sylvia knew, it was apparent that Joel was an apt pupil. It was also quite obvious to Sylvia that she had not been missed. But she was too tired to be angry, so she wandered back to the stream, and sat down on what she had begun to think of as "her" rock.

It was fully dark when she finally dipped her aching feet into the chilly water, and she sighed gratefully, arching and then relaxing the offended members. Her feet dangling, she laid back flat on the rock and tried to find the stars between the leaves of the overhanging trees.

A feeling of oppression began to hover at the edges of her awareness, and Sylvia realized that she seemed to be the only member of this strange community without a function. She was without purpose, and necessary to no one. That did not help her feel better, except that the problem was now clearly defined. She did have some cooking knowledge — it had begun as a hobby several years ago, and had become the subject of much reading for Sylvia while on her courier runs.

A twig snapped behind her, and she sat up, looked vainly around. The darkness was complete, and her eyes found nothing substantial on which to focus.

"Are you well?" It was Seral, his voice seeming to vibrate in the night air. Sylvia relaxed slightly.

"I suppose so," she replied. "Anything new on the computers?"

"No contact, if that is what you mean. But Joel is proving quite adept with the system."

"Wonderful," she muttered, and turned back to face the unseen water.

"Do you wish to return to the camp?" The healer's voice seemed to urge her, and she stiffened rebelliously.

"I might as well." But still she did not move, and after several minutes she heard a slight rustle of cloth as Seral seated himself behind her on the rock.

"You are troubled," he stated, then paused. "May I help in some way?"

"I don't know how you could," she replied, her momentary anger at him gone as quickly as it had come. "You can't change the attitudes of generations of Humans — or Vulcans — or even Andorians."

"I do not understand."

"Of course not." Softly. "I'm being obtuse — I'm trying to talk without saying anything. I've been alone for a long time, and I could use the company." And I feel so out of place here. No one will take to me. "Why were you on that ship?"

"I was enroute to attend a patient who was victim of a rare disorder — one I have studied intensively in the past. Unless a cure was discovered, he could not have survived to this time."

"I'm sorry."

"You are not at fault. It was doubtful that he could have been saved, but his family was powerful, and influenced the Master Healer greatly. So I was sent."

"There's so much about each other we don't know — how will we all ever live with each other?"

"Through necessity. As Humans became more advanced technologically, their 'civilization' put up barriers between them as individuals, pushing them away from normal interactions. It is the reason that term marriages have superceded permanent pairings or groupings among your people. When individuals who have never had to learn to deal with another try to do so, 79.6 percent find that the effort is more than they can make. Of term marriages, even six-month to one-year contracts, only 62.04 percent remain intact for the duration.

"Now, suddenly, we are here in a place without the normal barriers of civilization. Three races, each different, all of us unique. We must learn to live together or we will die together."

Sylvia chose to concentrate on the last part of his statements. "Don't you — don't Vulcans have some sort of survival test?"

"Yes. But I am not concerned with basic survival here. I am speaking of the needs each of us have to be around others of our own kind, other communicating beings."

A warm hand settled on Sylvia's shoulder. "I have seen your lack of place here. It is only the stress of accepting that we must stay here. It will not last."

She bowed her head. "In the meantime, I just have to struggle through, right?"

Almost imperceptibly, the hand tightened. "I will attempt to assist you," Seral said quietly.

For a time, they did not speak, and slowly Sylvia felt the tension drain from her. Finally, she pulled her feet from the water, picked up her sandals. "How are we fixed for dinner? "I'm starved."

Seral did not answer the obviously rhetorical question, and he had removed his hand from Sylvia's shoulder the instant she moved.

She stretched out a hand in the darkness. "Lead on, Night-creature," she said whimsically. Seral's warm fingers closed about her hand. Not like one would lead a child, she thought in surprised relief. Fatigue began to set in.

* * * * *

DAY 5

"I found this yesterday," Sylvia said, and put the few stalks of grain on the panel top next to Seral. He seemed to spend almost all of his time in the pod, so she had not waited for him in the common room.

Glancing over, he withdrew his hands from inside the distress signal panel, and carefully picked up a stalk. He ran the tricorder over it, and nodded slowly. "Compatible, for all of us. Where did you find it?"

"Downstream, almost half a day's walk. The trees quit, there's a plain — and small hills, all the way to the horizon."

"Was there much of this?" He was peeling back the husk, separating the individual grains.

"Now really. It grows in patches — looked like a random spread. Maybe — if it were all together — half an acre."

"We will have to use it for seed," he said absently. "Did you see any fruit-bearing plants, or any with blossoms?"

Sylvia shook her head, but he wasn't watching. "No. Just a little animal, like a squirrel. But it chewed sideways."

The Vulcan turned to look at her. "Squirrel?"

"Terran animal — I think it's in the rodent family. Small, furry scavengers — but it was kind of cute, not like a rat."

"This is quite ripe. We should go there, and store as much as possible, until we can determine a planting season."

"It would give you a break from that computer," Sylvia encouraged. "You've been at it non-stop for 4 days now."

"Joel has learned enough to be able to answer should anyone come within comm range, and you —"

"I'm going," she interjected. "These trees make me feel — closed in, almost trapped."

"Yet you spend much time on commuter ships."

"That's different. That's part of a job. And I'm doing something there. Anyway, I'm, going."

"Very well. The survey party was to remain out for four days. If they return sooner, the boy will be here. But it is now too advanced into the day to make such a journey. We shall go tomorrow." He turned back to his work, plainly dismissing Sylvia.

She wandered back to the common room, aware of her aching legs — spending her days on commuter ships wasn't like using a luxury liner, which had gyms aboard. Joel was there, reading through one of the manuals from the pod, so deeply involved that he didn't even hear her come in.

The girl sat for a time, but finally got up and wandered back to the pod. Seral glanced up at her approach.

"What else was in the emergency supplies?" she queried. "Soap, by any chance."

"Behind that panel —" he indicated one, "you will find an inventory and the supplies."

Sylvia pulled out the panel with a long list of items posted on it, and began to scan. She breathed a sigh of relief when she located soap on the inventory, and turned to find the appropriately numbered bin. She had discovered, to her dismay, that in the closeness of her shelter she smelled like the zoo when the maintenance system had broken down — not at all pleasant.

The soap was very much old-style: small blocks, just about right for a hand-held item. She set out for the stream; about a quarter mile downstream from "her" rock it had widened into a pool and was blocked at one end by some tumbled rocks, which had deepened the major portion while still allowing the water to flow freely.

Sylvia pulled her clothes off and plunged into the water, gasping as the icy liquid hit her skin. She did not stay in long — the water was too cold, even with the sun beating down, as the trees did not overshadow the stream during the day. But when she was done, her clothes were clean, her hair squeaked, and her body felt fresh and unsullied.

The tunic and skirt, hanging from a branch, were still damp, as was Sylvia herself. She pulled fingers through her hair to straighten the worst of the tangles, then stretched out on her stomach on the grassy carpeting beside the creek. This was a new experience, knowing no one was around to watch her, no surveillance by government or company or landlord security system. And yet, she could not help but glance around occasionally. It was still novel enough to be unsettling.

Coolness woke her — she had obviously dozed off, and her previously sunny bed was now in shadow.

Sylvia stood, regarded herself regretfully. Her skin was patterned from the grass, and it itched. She shrugged it off — it wouldn't last long.

But by evening Sylvia was almost out of her mind trying not to scratch the reddened welts that covered the entire front of her body, except where the packet was attached. Her face was unscathed — but only because she had used her arms as a pillow. She sat in the common room on an air-pillow, staring at the seams in the ceiling, clenching her fists erratically as she fought the overwhelming urge to tear at her flesh with her fingernails.

Seral and Joel entered, Seral lecturing the boy on some aspect of the computer and communications system, and Sylvia tried to look relaxed. The healer was apparently not deceived, for after he took his ration bar he chose a seat beside her, wordlessly discouraging Joel from joining them. The boy soon left the shelter and Sylvia inhaled deeply, then against her will, shuddered.

"What is it?" Seral demanded. "You are ill — you should have notified me immediately."

Sylvia squeezed her eyes shut. "I thought it would go away," she ground out through clenched teeth.

"What happened?" he repeated, his tone taking on that one peculiar to all the doctors Sylvia had ever encountered.

"I took a bath — and fell asleep on the grass," she responded, and extended an arm in his direction.

He turned it, then scanned with the tricorder he had carried in with him. Without speaking, he left the room, then returned and settled beside her again, a few blades of grass in his palm.

"The 'grass' has a fairly high acidity level — excreted at a higher rate because of the prolonged pressure and dampness of your body." Seral paused, then dropped her arm, which he had again been examining. "I would advise you to take a blanket in the future," he said. Sylvia glanced up at him. His tone had changed — but she could not determine what it meant.

"What do I do now — for the itching?" she beseeched.

"Do not scratch the skin. The irritation should fade, by tomorrow, I would estimate."

Sylvia remembered the plans for tomorrow. "Are you — are we still going?"

"I will examine the inflammation tomorrow. If it has not improved, we must endeavor to find out why." He looked at her steadily for a moment. "Do not scratch it."

Sylvia nodded, then signed as he left. There was something she didn't understand about Seral — something unlike what she would have expected from what little she knew of his race. He seemed so intense, there was such emphasis — but she couldn't determine where it was directed. She hadn't expected him to be — she couldn't quite put her finger on it. She ran through her reactions again. Yes. There was an odd feeling of intimacy at times when they were together — although there was nothing in his words or voice that she could pin down as the source of the impression.

She counted the ceiling seams again. This was either her imagination — or something would make itself known.

She chided herself. Vulcans weren't romantic — and certainly wouldn't be toward Humans. It's been a long time since you were involved with someone, she admonished herself; you must be reading it wrong.

This was going to be a long night.

DAY 6

It was still dark — her eyes focused. No, sunrise had begun. Sylvia sat up. Why was she awake so early? Suddenly her internal fog cleared and she scrambled into her clothing. They were going — to the plain; a chance to get away from this already boring site.

From inside her, a sneering little voice piped up. "Is that the only reason you're so eager?" She squelched it and grabbed her blanket, folded it into the small package it came in. It was small enough to fit into her pocket.

She forced herself into a state resembling calm, and as the first light filtered in through the trees, entered the common room to find it empty. Two ration bars were on the table, and she picked one up, then headed for the pod.

Seral was there, putting the cover panel back over something. "I have repaired the distress beacon," he announced when caught sight of her. "It will commence broadcasting in two minutes."

"That's great," Sylvia exclaimed. "But — we still don't know how far off the regular runs we are —"

"We cannot count on immediate rescue," Seral acknowledged. He stood up. "Let me see your arm."

Obediently Sylvia stretched out her hand. He scanned it, ran fingertips along the surface lightly. "Does this irritate?"

"A little," she admitted.

"What about the rest —" He glanced down at her legs, and Sylvia felt herself flush.

"Mostly gone..."

"It is fading, as I had expected. If it is not gone — completely — by the end of the day, you will inform me." He looked at her from beneath his brows, and she nodded.

"Are we still going?" The Vulcan stared at her for a moment, then nodded and turned to the supply panel and pulled out two ration bars. He slung the tricorder over his shoulder and tucked the bars into the sample case, then turned back to her.

"I will be scanning whenever possible — we will probably not make rapid progress."

Sylvia shrugged. If he was trying to tell her something, she'd missed it. "Fine with me," she replied.

"I have told Joel where we are going," he said, and turned toward the trees. Sylvia hurried after: he was a fast walker. He seemed so brusque today — maybe she'd pushed him. But he didn't seem to be someone who could be manipulated — perhaps this was his normal demeanor. Mostly, she decided, he was confusing.

They walked in silence for some time, Seral stopped occasionally to scan vegetation that hadn't appeared near the campsite. Once he stopped and dug through the soft soil, pulling out a thick, reddish root and tucking it into the sample case. Sylvia stood back and watched. His attitude did not invite questions, and she decided to keep quiet until she had something to say.

Well before noon they broke out of the forest, and Sylvia leaned against a tree, gasping slightly for breath. Though scanning, Seral had set a pace that pushed her to her limits. She had kept up, but was now so exhausted that she was ready to drop.

Seral, however, had headed directly to the closest patch of grain and was examining the plant minutely. He went on to another patch, and when Sylvia looked up from drinking at the stream, he was nowhere in sight. Insatiable curiosity, she supposed. She took her position against the tree, and prepared to wait..

An hour later she was still waiting. She had just made up her mind to go looking for him when he crested the nearest of the small hills. He advanced at a run, and came what Sylvia estimated to be five miles in just under a third of an hour. And after one deep breath — he wasn't even breathing hard. She stared at him for a moment, then noticed that his sample case was full, as was his outer tunic. He had knotted the neck and sleeves closed, and filled it like a sack — there was no additional room.

"Is that all edible?" she asked as he set it down. "Here —" she pulled the blanket from her pocket and spread it open, and Seral let the contents spill out.

"Yes. Mostly roots, some berries, and some plants that could flavor them. The berries are abundant in the valley beyond that hill. These tubers are harder to find, but have some minerals and vitamins essential to our health. This —" he indicated a green, round thing, "contains an oil that can be used for various purposes."

He sat down, and opened the sample case. "The grain is plentiful in that valley — we will have enough for both food and seed, should there be a severe winter in store for us."

Sylvia poked through the vegetables scattered over the blanket. "What's this?" She pulled out a small nut-like object, turned it over.

"It is a seed-pod from a plant that should be able to produce a natural fiber — for clothing, rope, bedding. Other parts of the plant will also produce a useful oil."

"How do you now all this — I mean, the fibers? I know that nutrition is part of your learning .." she trailed off.

"Vulcan's culture is closer to its roots, to basics, than most Human cultures. We still produce our own clothing from natural fibers, we cultivate our own crops — most of our households have a small garden, to remind us of our ancestry. We all came from the land — Surak returned us there. And there we remain, despite the progress of technology around us." He looked to the hills for a moment.

"But...I digress. My family has been involved in the production of fabric and clothing for many generations. I learned the basics of the industry at an early age, and had planned to make it my life's vocation, until I received the call to study as a healer."

"That must be — well, Human families don't seem to be so important any more. I was raised in a creche, although I do have friends who have families —"

"Families are of utmost importance in Vulcan culture," Seral said quietly.

"Thank you," Sylvia murmured. "I don't know much about your culture — I think the more we know, all of us, about each other, the better we'll get along here..."

"Knowledge does not necessarily equate with understanding," Seral replied. Sylvia looked up to see his eyes fastened intently on her. She looked away, tried to act as if she had seen nothing, though her heart was pounding in her ears. She pushed the churning inside of her aside, to be examined later.

"Do you still have the bars — or did you want to sample some of these?" she forced out. "I could use some lunch, after that walk."

Still watching her, Seral pulled out a ration bar and offered it to her. Sylvia regarded him warily as she ate in silence, then moved to the stream for a drink.

"It is noon — we should return while there is still daylight," she offered, and he nodded silently. They piled the collected foodstuffs and more grain into the blanket, using it as a sack and Seral donned his now-empty tunic. The pace was slower this time, and Sylvia thought that perhaps Seral had realized how hard she'd had to work to keep up with him. After a few miles, however, she changed her mind.

He had apparently kept track of places on the way there — now he was stopping and collecting specimens, and more roots and plant parts. By the time the camp was reached, the blanket was bulging, and when Sylvia went to soak her feet, Seral joined her — to rinse the dirt from the subsurface of the items he'd collected.

Like a kid in a toy store, Sylvia thought. He puts as much concentration into washing a vegetable as he does working on the distress beacon.

She counted the days on her fingers — only six. It seemed at once too many and not enough. Suddenly leery of the Vulcan's presence, Sylvia grabbed her sandals and returned to the campsite, noticing in the fading light that a path was gradually being worn in the grassy ground cover.

DAY 7

Sylvia had lain awake for a long time the previous night, trying to reconcile the confusion left with her after the day's journey. Seral, a Vulcan, was strangely contradictory. One moment he would be somehow intensely personal, and the next, so cool she'd swear it was snowing. His intensity reminded her of past experiences — but they'd been disasters, and were perhaps not valid comparisons. She finally decided that he'd become unbalanced in the statis field, and tried to put it aside.

Waking, she smelled smoke — and opened her flap to a lungful of it. Coughing, eyes streaming, she escaped upwind, to face an apologetic Joel. "I guess I forgot to check the direction of the breeze," he admitted ruefully. His face and hands were smeared with black, and it was evident that his first tries in lighting the small fire had been less than successful.

Sylvia crouched down beside him. "How'd you get the wood?"

"Oh, this is just some dead stuff we found in the trees. And there's a flint in the pod supplies — with directions, of course." He grinned. "I'm a city kid."

Sylvia fanned at a wisp of smoke that had drifted in her direction. "Aren't we all! Are we trying those roots today? Or are we still stuck with ration bars?"

"Well, Seral said that stuff is OK — I guess we just have to find out whether we can stand it." He grinned again, and wiped his forehead, smudging the soot around. "Speak of the demon, and he will appear...."

Seral had entered the clearing, carrying several thin sticks that had been sharpened at one end, and several of the roots they had brought back from yesterday's expedition. He sat down between Joel and Sylvia on the upwind side of the fire, and produced a knife.

"These are all edible," he announced, "but may not be palatable." He cut one of the reddish tubers into thick slices, speared it on a stick, and handed it to Joel, then quickly produced another for Sylvia. Curiosity won out, and she nibbled at the edge of the slice. It was bland, crisp, and not particularly appetizing. Following Seral's example, she held the stick over the flame, and waited until it darkened slightly, then blew on it and tried it again.

Seral did not wait, but ate his hot and steaming. He nodded. "A welcome change from processed rations," he stated. Sylvia bit gingerly into her piece, noticing that Joel was finishing his with relish. It was still bland, but the cooking made a difference.

"With salt, it would be wonderful," she agreed. Seral reached into his sample case, then toasted another slice, and sprinkled small bits of a plant leaf on it. He tested it, and his face relaxed slightly. "Quite palatable," he informed her.

Sylvia and Joel followed his example, and ate the second portion eagerly — the herb added the flavor enhancement of salt, but without the often overpowering tartness of that spice.

"Wonderful," Joel breathed.

"Now," Seral continued, "the pale root." He pulled one out. It was almost ten inches long, and he divided it evenly between the three of them. Sylvia watched him

eat it with some enjoyment, but cautiously waited for Joel to bite. The boy took a piece, chewed, and grabbed quickly for the water canister beside the fire.

"That's — spicy!" he exclaimed. "Not like anything I've tasted before — but hot!"

Sylvia sniffed hers, then put it aside. Seral examined the brown shriveled root he had pulled out next, then waved it under his nose. "This will make a mild spice, or even a tea when properly dried, but it is too strong to be eaten raw."

"If you have a pot, I could come up with a soup of sorts," Sylvia offered.

Seral nodded. "I will produce one." He left without another word, and Sylvia looked at Joel. The boy shrugged his shoulders.

"Vulcans are strange," he said. "He doesn't waste any words on pleasantries, that's for sure."

Remembering yesterday's strange conversation, Sylvia did not comment, just smiled in agreement. "Another day to kill," she said mournfully.

"Better than me. I gotta crack the books — he's a real taskmaster. Seems to expect that once I've read something one time, I've memorized it," Joel complained, wiping his fingers on his pant leg.

"Maybe Vulcans can do that," she consoled him. "I guess I ought to see what I can hunt up for bowls. Somehow I knew I'd end up with this job."

"Yeah." Joel nodded. "But you've been bored, I can tell. At least it's something to do. I wonder how the others are doing."

"We should know by tonight sometime, probably. I'm glad you reminded me. I should make enough for all of us."

They wandered to the pod somewhat later, Joel with his book, Sylvia in search of cooking utensils. Seral had managed to improvise a large pot from some of the metal interior of the pod. It wasn't beautiful, but it would serve for now. He gave her vegetables, his knife, and a double handful of the grain, then turned to Joel and began interrogating him on the manual the boy still carried.

The day passed with agonizing slowness. Several times Sylvia attempted to listen to the ongoing lesson in the pod, but she was carefully ignored, and concluded that she was in the way and not to be considered a prospective student.

As the shadows began to lengthen Joel ambled into the clearing and stopped to sniff appreciatively at the aroma coming from the simmering pot. "Good," he breathed, "when do we eat."

"Whenever we want," Sylvia replied. "But I haven't found any containers for bowls yet—"

"These should serve," Seral stated from behind her. He was carrying several of the deeper trays from the supply cabinet, and he crouched beside the fire, using the largest as a dipper. He filled trays for Joel and Sylvia, then one for himself before sitting back on the log they'd moved close to the fire.

He nodded, one uplifted eyebrow denoting surprise as he tasted the steaming liquid. "Palatable," he commented, then tasted it again. "The combination of the various ingredients presents a most unique taste."

Sylvia blew on her portion, then tasted it carefully. Not knowing the vegetables well, she had not been able to anticipate the taste result. But the Vulcan was right — it was very good. Unlike anything she'd tasted before, it would be easy to vary the rich taste and texture enough to keep it from being boring.

They sat quietly, and Sylvia noticed that Joel kept glancing around in the direction she had arbitrarily named "north." "What are you looking for?" she asked.

He looked at her incredulously. "The others should be back today," he replied. "I thought they'd be here by now —"

"Oh." Sylvia poured herself another smaller portion of the stew, then stirred what was left in the pot. "We can't preserve this longer than about four hours, so if you want more, go ahead. I'll make more when they get back." Seral refilled his tray, as did Joel, and they managed to finish off the pot of stew by the time darkness fell.

Sylvia cleaned up after them, reflecting again on the subservient position of women. Whenever Humans — and some other races — slipped below a certain level of technology, the roles of men and women slipped as well — into positions millenia old, and perhaps racially remembered. In the space of a few days, she had been "demoted" to cook — in a group where all but Joel had knowledge that would assist in their survival.

The others sat around the fire — another survival element common to many species. Joel was again being grilled on the computer's workings, and Sylvia sat on the log slightly apart from them, but near enough to feel the warmth of the fire on her legs. The evening was unusually comfortable; Joel's presence served as a buffer and Sylvia did not feel that strange intensity from Seral that he had demonstrated on the previous day. We're beginning to function as a group, Sylvia realized, not just individuals thrown together by chance. Yet there was tension — the surveyors were overdue. Groups. Sylvia repeated to herself. She could foresee the three absent individuals joining forces for expediency. Although different in background, races and beliefs, they seemed similar somehow. Time alone would tell if she was right, or just wasting time in idle speculation.

Finally, after the small moon had risen clear of the trees and Joel was blinking and nodding, Sylvia nudged him. "Go get some sleep. He —" she indicated the healer — "will stay up; he never seems to sleep. If there's news, he'll let us know." The boy nodded groggily, and they left Seral to his thoughts.

DAY 8

The shadows were short — evidently Sylvia had slept late. She heard voices, realized the others were back, and scrambled into the open. They were in the common room, and had spread full packs of various items all about the center of the room. She recognized several of the items Seral had located, but many more were not familiar.

"— finally got out of the trees," Ballinger was saying. "Past the forest, it's pastoral. Rolling hills, fruit trees and bushes. These vegetables," he pointed to a round orange thing, "are all over the place. They grow on a vine, right around the trees." He paused, saw Sylvia settling into a chair, and nodded genially at her. Donner glanced at her, then settled into a new position, his back squarely to her. Thonar did not even look around.

"Past the first mile or so of flatlands was a range of softest looking hills you'd ever want to see," Ballinger went on. "We covered 'em — by the end of the second day there was still nothing but hills and some trees here and there."

"All the land was covered in either this short grassy stuff, or the edibles. Never saw any animals, though, except a few real small ones — too small really for a meal."

From the corner of her eye Sylvia saw Seral stiffen ever so slightly, and not relax until Ballinger's next comment.

"But I guess we'll be comfortable enough as vegetarians — there's enough grain for bread, we got an oil-producing plant or two, and we even found all kinds of things — herbs and such — for spices. We'll be comfortable enough here, I think."

"What is this?" Seral was examining what appeared to be a rock.

"I dunno — who added this?" Ballinger questioned.

"It bears marks of workmanship," Thonar explained. "This has been fabricated intentionally, for a purpose. It is a tool."

Sylvia inhaled deeply, held it for a long moment, then breathed out quietly. Intelligent life — they had never considered this.

"The marks are worn, weathered. It is very old," Seral observed.

Thonar nodded. "It was in the water where we camped two nights ago."

"We'll worry about it when we see someone around here," Ballinger interrupted loudly. "Meanwhile, let's take care of us. We've got food sources, plenty of 'em, we have trees for building and fuel, and so far, we've got beautiful weather. Let's take advantage of them."

The Vulcan was examining different items with the tricorder, and finally finished his task. The others were watching him expectantly, and he put the final item down. "All of these objects are edible, for all of us." He looked at Ballinger.

"We have found an area downstream that is much as what you have described. But it is somewhat closer."

Ballinger stood, rubbed his hands together expectantly. "Well, where do we want to build?"

DAY 10

The argument over location took precedence over everything but food for the next two days. As Sylvia had expected, she cooked all the meals, and found herself relegated to all the preparation and clean-up associated with the job. The others spent their time traveling back and forth between the two proposed sites, the conversation and oratory rarely ceasing.

But finally it was put to a vote. Unsurprisingly to Sylvia, the majority favored the small clearing. She had noticed, in herself and some of the others, a slight uneasiness in the open, a feeling of stronger security in enclosed spaces.

Civilization does strange things to us, she ruminated, piling the final utensils in the area of the common room she had staked out. Either location would have had equal advantages and disadvantages, but we couldn't stand all that open space — the feeling of being unprotected.

Wearily she settled onto a cushion and began to pay half-hearted attention to the current discussion.

"— no reason we can't start out with a large, single-room dwelling," Ballinger was saying. "It'd be easiest, fastest, and we could design it for future additions. The important thing is to prepare for bad weather."

"There is as yet no evidence for inclement weather," Seral interjected dryly.

"What about individual privacy?" added Donner. He shot Sylvia a glance that needed no interpretation, and she sighed. He always seemed to be aware of her location in regard to himself, as one might keep track of a dangerous animal.

"The prefabricated shelters are designed to last about a standard year," Joel said, "and we've got tools; we can take our time at this." Donner sniffed. "A building would make us more attuned to this place, and give us a feeling of permanence."

"It would give us an acceptance of the situation," Sylvia said, then cursed her tongue silently. They had all turned to look at her, varying looks of impatience mirrored on all but two faces.

"She has a point," Joel said defensively. "If we have a permanent place, we can settle into a routine, and make a mark for ourselves here."

"Donner, what sort of designs did your colony use in building residences?" Ballinger asked. The discussion continued.

Night fell before the would-be architects were distracted by the smell of food, but by then they had a rough design worked out: subject, of course, to future arguments. It was essentially an oblong room, with a fireplace centered in one long wall. The door was near the corner of the opposite wall. In the ends of the room small dividing walls were planned to separate the area into four small sleeping rooms — it was the largest number they were inclined to assemble at the time.

"But some will get private rooms," Thonar protested, his voice a slight whine. Ballinger rolled his eyes, and crouched beside the irate Andorian. Donner leaned forward to hear — he had also protested the arrangement.

"We've already agreed to pairings on a random draw," the executive told them quietly. "Do you want to share a room with the girl, or that Vulcan? He'd drive you crazy in a day."

Sylvia had pretended not to hear, but had an incredibly difficult time keeping a straight face. Both Donner and Thonar had been more affected by the mention of sharing quarters with her than with Seral, and had acquiesced with poor grace.

DAY 11

After dawn and breakfast, they set about searching for the right place in the area to erect their future dwelling. Fortune had apparently been with them. Under a few inches of grass and soil lay solid bedrock, which explained the clearing. The trees would not have survived with no place to sink their roots, but the hardy grass, with plenty of sun, had thrived.

Sylvia was none too subtly encouraged to stay out of the way as the area was measured and marked off and discussion began about the foundation. After watching for a while, she headed for the pod, as Joel was studying there. Seral had decided — and persuaded the others — that someone must remain by the pod at all times, in case anyone came within range of the beacon.

"Well, has anyone called yet?" she asked, peering over the boy's shoulder. He shrugged.

"Not yet," he replied. "This watch-standing business is silly, but I wasn't elected boss, so...."

"I know what you mean," Sylvia sighed. "Don't you feel like a second-class citizen? Of course, on Andor they have second-class citizens, but...."

"Yeah. I'm young, but your only fault is being female. Unfortunately, in a few years I'll be of 'legal age,' but you'll still be a girl."

She sat down in the pod's doorway. "I wonder how long it'll take them to build this...mansion they're planning."

A large crashing and shouts drowned Joel's reply for a moment. "There's your answer," he said, waving his hand in the direction of the clearing. "First tree down already, and it's not even noon yet."

"Speaking of which, I ought to think about a meal — they'll be hungry by then."

"I'm dying of boredom here!" Joel protested. She patted his shoulder.

"I'll save my lunch, and when they're done, I'll bring both meals here," she told him.

"Well, just make sure they watch where they're dropping those trees," he instructed.

Sylvia snorted at the thought of the reaction should she try to direct operations.

The noon meal of boiled grain and cooked roots was so well received that she had to make more for herself and Joel. As she cooked, she saw that they were using the industrial phaser to cut the trees, and had already dug out the soil along the foundation line to the depth of the bedrock. By the time darkness fell, they had laid a complete foundation and cut more trees for the outer wall.

The Vulcan's accurate eye had directed the rimming and notching of the ends, and the joinings were virtually perfect. Ballinger was enthusiastic. "If we continue at this rate," he exulted over dinner, "we should be finished in a week — we won't even need to fill in the cracks. It'll be almost airtight, near as I can see."

With the phaser and the Vulcan and Andorian's strength, the outer shell was indeed finished in a week. The roof took a few days more. The phaser was slowly losing its charge, and they were conserving carefully. But the roof was designed solidly, and when it rained several days later, not a single leak as discovered.

The grass and soil were dug out, the inner walls erected, and the door completed by the end of the second week of construction. Surprisingly enough, Sylvia realized, the work had gone smoothly, with no arguments or major disagreements the entire time. Of course, she reflected, it could have been because everyone was too tired to fight by the end of the day. Usually after dinner the two Human males crawled into their shelters, the Andorian lasting a little longer. Seral, however, made it his practice to check the pod each evening. Many times he was still working there when Sylvia found herself nodding near the fire late at night.

DAY 25

Finally, the cabin was declared habitable. Over breakfast, Ballinger called a meeting.

"Well, we've done a lot here," he announced. "We've built ourselves a place to keep us warm if this planet has any sort of winter. We're ready to move in, to make our mark on this world. But I think we need to sit — in our home — and draw up plans for the future." He paused, but no one spoke, which seemed to disconcert him. "We need to plan for crops — or to harvest what's growing. We need to plan a storage building for wood and food. We need to salvage all we can from the pod — everything but the distress signal mechanisms and the computer. We need to see what we have — and what we'll need, what will have to be improvised, and what we'll have to do without." He looked around again. "In short, we need to take inventory. And we need to rest."

"Hear, hear!" Joel chortled. Donner looked at him sourly. "We need a party!" the boy added excitedly. Donner turned away pointedly, and set his thin lips so tightly that they disappeared.

Sylvia bit her lip to keep the grin off her face. Joel had been complaining bitterly about his two weeks spent in the pod, and had been waiting for any excuse for a break.

"Well?" Ballinger urged.

"Why do we not move our few possessions into the building and enjoy the results of our work?" lisped Thonar.

Ballinger stood, and dumped his dish in the area beside the fire that had been designated the equivalent of a disposal chute. "Well, why not?" In a matter of moments they were gone, mattresses and blankets and whatever small personal items each had managed to accumulate during the past few weeks picked up and carried into the cabin. While Sylvia cleaned up the remains of the breakfast, the temporary shelters were collapsed, the fabric of two of them used to make curtains to partition the doors of the sleeping areas.

When she entered the cabin with her cooking paraphernalia, she was not surprised that no one even turned, the conversation did not slacken or even pause. She piled her armload into the corner by the fireplace, and sat down at the empty end of the table.

" — almost no variance. This would seem to indicate minimal climatic change on this planet — probably almost unnoticeable."

"What our esteemed healer is saying," Ballinger broke in, "is that the dead of winter on this planet won't be any different from the heat of summer."

"Essentially, yes," Seral agreed.

"This planet must have almost no axial rotation," Donner said.

"That is correct," Seral replied. "We can grow crops all year, or harvest from existing plants on a regular basis. We will, however, need to harvest the fiber-bearing plant in some quantity. The fabric produced by synthetic fabricators will not last indefinitely. Naturally grown, woven fabrics have a longer life and are more efficient for both warmth and cooling."

"Then we'll need to make a wheel and a loom," Donner said. "Or thread can be worked into shape by use of a small hook or needle."

"I can do that," Joel volunteered. "I had an arts teacher who covered needlework one year. I can show anyone else how to do it, too."

"It would be easier than crafting a loom," Donner said thoughtfully. "We can't expect to be here indefinitely. I don't believe we need to plan on a stay of a decade or more." He nodded almost grudgingly at Joel. "A good idea, boy. You have saved us much work."

"Then," Ballinger took over again, "to keep up variety, we can send a party out for supplies every so often. And — what sort of watches did you have in mind for the pod?"

"A day's rotation would seem to be most feasible," Seral offered. "We can set up one of the extra shelters there, and should a signal be received the watch-stander would be awakened. The pod should be manned at all times."

"Fine," Ballinger agreed. "I'll draw up a duty roster, plus one for supply parties, on a regular basis."

"That should be soon," Sylvia interjected firmly. "We have, at most, supplies for two more days."

Ballinger nodded. "Donner and Seral," he continued, "you two know the most about fabric and the like. You can decide what needs to be done to produce material. And get Joel to help design and manufacture whatever tools you'll need for that. And since our phaser is almost exhausted, we should implement our other tools."

He stood, stretched. "But today — is a day off. We kick back — no work. We deserve a break. We'll send a supply party out tomorrow."

To Sylvia's great humor, when everyone was ready for bed at the end of the day, they had still not established rooming arrangements, and they all stood about looking at each other awkwardly.

"Obviously Sylvia gets a room to herself," Joel volunteered. "How do we decide for the rest of us?"

"I will room with Thonar," Donner volunteered. The others looked at him in surprise, but he offered no comment or explanation.

Ballinger draped his arm around Joel's shoulder. "You're about the age of my youngest," he said genially, "so if you can behave, you can have half of my room." Joel nodded and smiled, appearing slightly abashed. "Seral, you get the other private room, then," the executive continued. The Vulcan only nodded, and waited for the others to move their possessions. When all the choices were made, the doubled rooms ended up on one side of the cabin, the single room on the other.

Sylvia felt strange surrounded by walls again, instead of the thin, but tough material of the shelter. The feeling of space, and the small sounds of the other inhabitants as they settled themselves for sleep, were mildly disturbing. From the next room came only the sound of deep, even breathing, and Sylvia envied Seral the control with which he could apparently fall asleep almost immediately.

Sylvia stretched, then sat up. Even though the others had been working strenuously, she had done nothing unusual in the past two weeks, and she wasn't as thoroughly exhausted as the rest of the group. She pulled on her tunic and skirt and slipped into the main room, but could see nothing. She pulled the latch on the door and stepped outside into the silvery moonlight. The fire ring, used for the last time this night, was still smoldering, so she threw a handful of kindling on the coals and poked them to life, watching carefully until they caught and began to give off some warmth and light. Slowly, watching the process attentively, she built it to a full blaze, adding a small log from the stockpile of wood.

The crackling of the heated sap was almost the only sound in the night, punctuated softly by the breeze whispering through the trees. Sylvia clasped her hands around her knees and leaned back against the log, staring up at the sky.

The stars were...just stars. No feat of imagination could transform them into familiar ones, and Sylvia knew she didn't have the math or astronomy knowledge to figure out what familiar star patterns would look like from another angle.

She heard a rustling beside her, and looked up to see Donner seating himself on the log. "Couldn't sleep?" he asked.

She nodded, wondering at his unexpected civility. He had discarded his shirt and wore only his trousers and sandals, his pale skin gleaming whitely in the faint moonlight.

"I am restless this night also," he said, not looking at her. "Do you know the customs of my people?"

"Very little," she admitted warily.

He nodded. "As most. You know, of course, that we segregate males from females — that is the item most mentioned by the newsies." Sylvia nodded. "What they do not mention is that there are specific times when a male may approach a female not of his family-group." He shifted, moved slightly closer to her. "Would you — be with me? For a night, perhaps more —"

Sylvia stood up and began to bank the fire, trying to hide the fact that she was shaking with anger. "You treat me like I don't exist," she said calmly, "then have the nerve to try to get me to sleep with you." She turned to face him. "If everyone but you and I were killed, I wouldn't let you come near me." She turned toward the cabin.

"It is common knowledge that you are with the Vulcan —" Donner hissed.

Sylvia did not even slow down. "I don't care what you think you know. The answer is still no — so don't ask again." Donner yanked at her from behind, his wiry strength spinning her to the ground. He stood over her, glaring.

"You have no right to refuse me," he raged. "I am—"

"You will cease at once," a low voice said from the cabin door. Donner looked around, and backed away as Seral stepped forward and helped Sylvia to stand.

"Keep out of this, Vulcan," Donner growled.

"She is not willing. You will not force yourself — on anyone," Seral returned coolly. He took Sylvia by the arm and propelled her back into the cabin, and into her room. "Do not go out alone," he warned her. "The enemy we bring with us may be more dangerous than anything native to this place." With a rustle of the curtain, he was gone, and Sylvia sat down quickly. She looked at her hands, and was not surprised to see them trembling.

He's right, you idiot, she told herself. You should have known this would happen — Donner or someone, sooner or later. She cast her eyes skyward and sighed. Why me?

DAY 26

After nearly a month of clear skies, this day dawned cloudy, thick dark masses working their way toward the stranded group. Ballinger was dismayed. "Well, we still have to send out a party for supplies, and we have to think about doing our cooking inside, and getting some warmer clothing if we're going to have a lot of days like this."

Thonar and Donner volunteered to go for the supplies, taking ration bars in place of breakfast. Donner managed to convey without speaking that the tasteless bars were highly preferable to anything cooked here.

Sylvia knew that Ballinger had noticed the byplay and was watching her carefully, but she did not bother to enlighten him as to the cause. Seral treated her no differently — she could not be sure that he had heard the taunting remark Donner had hurled at her the previous night. If he had — what would it change? She didn't think that the Vulcan would allow himself to be affected by what someone else thought, especially if it were not true.

She began assembling the items to prepare breakfast, avoiding the watching stare she knew Ballinger had fastened on her. She went outside to the fire ring to escape, hoping that when she waved food under his nose he would forget about his suspicion. But when she returned he had not moved, and she knew he would expect an explanation.

She was right. "What the hell's going on?" he demanded.

"What are you talking about" she asked innocently.

He frowned. "Don't play games. Donner doesn't like you, hasn't from the beginning, but now —he's acting like you're a disease-carrier or something."

Sylvia turned away, began pouring the grain cereal into their makeshift bowls. "It's not important," she replied calmly. "Let it go."

Ballinger turned to his food. "All right, for now. But if it gets out of hand, let me know." He shot a look at Seral, but the Vulcan was eating his breakfast as if nothing had happened.

As if planned distraction, Joel stumbled through the curtain covering his doorway. "Smells good," he mumbled, rubbing his eyes. "I sure slept late."

The tension was broken, and Sylvia sighed inwardly as she poured cereal for the boy and herself. The meal was eaten in silence, and finally Ballinger finished and left. Sylvia risked a glance at Seral, to find him watching her intently. He did not speak, possibly constrained by Joel's presence, and she finally broke the silence.

"Do you know if there's any more rock around here that might chip? I'd like to try to grind some of this grain and see what I can do with it..."

"I will endeavor to find something that will serve as mortar and pestle," he replied.

"For bread?" Joel asked eagerly. "I sure miss that."

"I haven't found anything yet to make bread rise, and we have no oven. But I could probably make a flat bread, and it would at least be different. And are the oils from any of those seed pods edible?"

The Vulcan raised an eyebrow. "I had not thought to check," he admitted.

"I never thought I'd hear that!" Joel chortled. He shoved his bowl away. "Gotta make a call," he announced blithely, and was gone.

"Why did you not tell Ballinger that Donner assaulted you?" Seral asked, as soon as the door closed.

Sylvia sat both elbows on the table and rested her chin on one palm. "Group dynamics," she said. "If I say anything, we all have to acknowledge it and act accordingly. If I ignore it, then we all can, and go on with our lives. And if I antagonize Donner too badly, he could really make it hard for me around here. We don't need that."

"Survival is struggle in plenty," the Vulcan agreed.

She nodded. "I thought about it for a long time last night. Being the only female here will make it harder on me — I don't want to be the cause of a fight, let alone start one."

"That is wise," Seral commented. Sylvia thought that he sounded slightly surprised. She stood and began stacking the bowls, thinking that the Vulcan was finished. But he was still watching her expectantly, and it made her nervous and clumsy.

"Sit down a moment," he finally requested, and she warily took a position facing him. His dark eyes held hers for a moment, until she looked away. "Would it be helpful to this group if you were to — appear to join with — one of the adult males?"

Sylvia stared at him, stunned. "You mean — just who did you have in mind?"

Now he looked away. "Ballinger tends to let his authoritarian desire rule him; Thonar is not overly fond of Humans; Donner is the primary source of your discomfort. That leaves only one logical choice —"

"I think —" she interrupted him — that a pretend romance would be just a little bit too forced for this situation. They would see through it in no time."

"You believe so?" He seemed taken aback.

"Oh, we Humans are wonderfully deceptive," she replied quietly, grateful that her voice did not betray the trembling confusion that had rushed over her. "I could probably pull it off. But they'd never believe it coming from you. Vulcans just don't have that kind of reputation." Quickly she picked up the remains of the meal and fled the room, fighting the overwhelming agitation that threatened her slight grip on control.

Just before the door closed behind her, she thought she heard him speak. "I would be convincing...."

Sylvia hurried to the stream. Part of her was wishing for piped water, and realizing bitterly that since she was the one who would mainly benefit from it, she would probably never see it. Another part of her, intensely emotional, was turning Seral's words over in her mind, examining them carefully. Why? Why would he be convincing? Only to maintain the discipline of relations that were important in the little group, or as there another reason? Maybe because it wouldn't be pretense? Come on, she chided herself. A Vulcan? You're no Amanda Grayson.

She shook her head violently, as much to shake her hair from her eyes as to banish these disturbing thoughts. Somehow, it seemed that he was coming on to her — advancing the possibility of a relationship. Must be in my mind, she told herself firmly. I'm getting paranoid in this place.

She returned to the clearing some time later, to find Joel working with some of the cotton-like fiber, twisting it between his fingers to form a thick, coarse thread. "This'll work really good," he announced when Sylvia took a seat on the grass beside him. "But I don't know how to make a wheel — Donner'll have to do that, him being a colonist and all."

Sylvia had been unable to prevent herself from stiffening ever so slightly when Joel mentioned Donner, and apparently the boy's sharp eyes had noticed. He edged closer. "Is he bothering you?" he asked, almost a whisper.

"Who?" Sylvia returned blandly.

"You know. Donner. You get jumpy whenever he's around and he's really nasty and stiff around you."

"No, he's not bothering me," she retorted hotly, suddenly angry at the lack of privacy. "Leave it alone, please."

"Hey — I'm sorry," Joel said. "I didn't mean to make you mad — I was only trying to help."

Sylvia's eyes filled and she blinked, trying to prevent the moisture from betraying her. "I know," she replied shakily. "I guess it's just a bad day for me. And there's so little to do here — I'm bored."

"Yeah, I know. But when we get some more of this stuff at least well have something to keep our hands busy."

"I wish — I hate not having music, or something to read. I guess of everything, not having that is the worst."

"I don't miss tutors," Joel shrugged. "But I wish — I'd like to be around my people." He paused, looked at her carefully. "Don't you miss your friends?"

Sylvia did not answer, thankful this once for the annoying hair that covered her eyes. "Not much, actually. I spent a lot of time on those commuter ships for my job, and sometimes it'd be weeks before I'd have a few days groundside to spend with anyone."

"Oh. That sounds boring, too."

"Not really. I got to be a regular on some runs, and I knew a lot of the staff and crew, and there's always a busy game lounge. Plus music and book tapes. There's so much to read that I never really ran out of things to do." She looked around. "But here — all I do is cook and wash dishes. I think I'm going to try to get onto the next food run. At least I'd get out of that for a day."

Joel snorted. "They'd probably want you to cook enough before you left to feed everyone while you were gone."

"And they'd leave the dishes for when I got back," she agreed.

DAY 30

Donner and Thonar had not brought supplies to last long, preferring to concentrate on the bushes for the fiber plant. They were planning to begin work on a wheel to spin the stuff into a thread suitable for working into clothing. So another trip was being planned for this day, and Sylvia determined to go along.

To her surprise, Ballinger gave in, and decided that she could make the journey with him. The others were hard at work on the wheel, ignoring anything less than a shout. The communications watch had finally been instituted, and Joel was assigned that duty this day, so only Sylvia and Ballinger were available.

Falling into step beside him, Sylvia noticed that Ballinger had lost some of the paunch that had characterized him at their arrival. Although his face seemed leaner and more deeply lined, he appeared more relaxed. He did not waste breath on chatter, but walked steadily, and Sylvia was surprised — she had not thought he would be so athletic. But after they had collected what they felt was a good supply of roots and vegetables, and settled down for lunch, Ballinger pointed at her decisively.

"Now," he said firmly, "there is no one else around. We've done our work, we've got better than half the day to get back. I want to know what's going on between you and Donner. Or — " he forestalled her protest with an uplifted hand, "What's not going on."

When she looked away, he leaned forward and caught her wrist. "I won't let this go!" She pulled back, and he released her, as if embarrassed. Sylvia watched him carefully, but he leaned back and clasped his hands around his knees.

"I took charge here," he began, as if telling a story, "because I knew that if we were going to be here for a while, we needed an organizer, an authority figure. If anyone had challenged me, I would have stepped aside." He was watching her intently, but Sylvia did not relax at all.

"But no one challenged. Everyone has accepted what I'm doing. So now I have the continued responsibility of keeping this group running smoothly and progressing as best we can. Little girl, if there are going to be problems, I have to be aware of them. I can set it up so there are buffers between you and Donner, if necessary. But you have to tell me!"

Sylvia dropped her gaze. "I was trying to keep from causing any problems," she whispered. Ballinger's words had destroyed her idea of what might be best. "I thought — if I kept it to myself — that I could keep it controlled, and not draw attention to it."

Ballinger snorted, not unkindly. "Who did you think wouldn't notice?"

She shrugged miserably. "I don't know. It just seemed important not to acknowledge it. I thought we could act as if nothing was wrong."

"But we can't," he admonished her. "Now tell me about it."

Sylvia told him of Donner's advance, and his angry reaction when she refused.

"Our Vulcan seems rather protective of you," Ballinger said, and Sylvia looked up, startled. She had not expected to hear that from him, nor had she expected him to be so observant. She puzzled over his choice of words.

"Protective?"

"You don't even — girl, if he wasn't a Vulcan, I'd say he was hovering. Maybe it's just as well...."

He glanced at the sky. "We should be getting back. I'll do what I can to keep some space between you and Donner. If he tries anything again — well, just don't get caught alone with him. He's kind of strange."

They bundled up their supplies and began the walk back to the encampment.

The sun was just disappearing when they returned, and to Sylvia's surprise, the evening meal was almost finished. Seral was sitting near the fireplace, occasionally stirring a simmering stew. Joel helped Sylvia unload her bundle, and she patted his shoulder when they finished. "Thanks. I'm going to go wash. I'll be back for dinner."

Dipping her feet into the stream, she gasped as the icy water began to numb them. But they were tougher now, and no longer blistered on these long walks. In the fading light, she examined her sandals carefully. The soles seemed sturdy enough, but the straps were beginning to show signs of excessive wear, stretching and cracking.

I wonder what we'll come up with to replace these, she thought. Wooden shoes? Hearing a noise behind her, she turned to look, but saw only a quick movement as something solid crashed against the side of her head.

Through a black haze Sylvia heard the tricorder whirring, and struggled to sit up, but she was firmly held down. "Do not move," Seral's voice instructed her. She regretted it sincerely -- the movement had made her aware of the violent pounding taking place inside her skull. Even an involuntary moan emerged only as a breathy sigh.

"What happened?" she forced out. The scanner clicked off.

"Someone struck you," the Vulcan told her. "Did you see who it was?"

She shook her head, then cursed silently -- the pounding had intensified. "No. Just a noise, then nothing. You don't know who did it?"

"Everyone had the opportunity, but all deny the deed," he replied. "How long were you here, before...."

She thought back, and with an effort, remembered her aging sandals. "Just a few minutes."

She heard Joel's voice. "How is she?"

"Conscious," replied Seral. "The injury will cause severe headaches for several days, however. She will need to rest." Sylvia sensed rather than saw him sliding the tricorder over his shoulder. "Go prepare a chair and build up the fire. Her feet have been immersed in the water for several hours."

Belatedly she realized that she couldn't feel her feet, and sat up, trying to reach them, just as the healer bent forward to pick her up. Her forehead connected sharply with his chin and she sagged backwards, only his arm behind her preventing a hard landing on the stone.

"You must remain still," he told her again, a strange fierceness in his voice silencing her. He lifted her carefully and she settled her head against his shoulder and closed her eyes.

"Feels good," she heard herself mumble, "You're so warm --" Sleep enfolded her welcomingly. The next thing she knew was the comfort of a chair, the fire bright and warm on her face, one foot tingling painfully as the circulation was rubbed back into it.

"That hurts," she said, the words drawing themselves out. She opened her eyes long enough to see Seral sitting by her feet, his long fingers massaging firmly. But the effort was too much, and she sighed deeply and closed her eyes again.

* * * * *

She was running, but it wasn't fast enough. Her pursuer was faster, and dangerous. She didn't know the ground she was traveling, but it wasn't a city as she would have thought -- it was like running in a park, one that stretched endlessly before her. She fell, cried out in terror, but the unknown assailant was gone, as if he had never been.

Cool water soothed her forehead, a warm voice called her name, but she couldn't speak, couldn't call out to be led away from this whirlpool of confusion and fear. Doubt assailed her and she fled even that trusted voice, into the twisting blackness that surrounded her. Colors swirled, but they were heavy with menace, and brought no comfort.

After what seemed like an eternity, she heard a voice. //Sylvia.// She paused, looked around, but could only see formless, smokelike swirls.

//Where are you?// she called. Slowly a light began to show through the murk.

//Here. Come -- I will help you.//

//You can't,// she informed the slowly brightening light. //I'm lost.//

//I know the way out,// the light assured her. //You must come with me.// It projected warmth, confidence, assurance.

//I'm afraid. There's something -- it wants to hurt me.//

//I will protect you.// Strength, calmness.

Slowly the fog began to lighten and clear away, and Sylvia recognized the wooden walls of her room in the cabin. Seral was seated on the floor beside her, straightening slowly away from her, his face determinedly devoid of expression.

She looked around, noticed that it was daylight. Ballinger stood by the doorway, and Joel was hovering anxiously beyond him.

"What happened?" she managed to croak. Ballinger sent Joel out for some water before answering.

"Someone knocked you a good one on the head," he replied. "You got a bad chill or something from having your feet in the water for several hours -- you've been feverish and delirious ever since."

She sat up wobbily, sipped at the water Joel brought. "How long was I like that?" Ballinger and Seral exchanged looks.

"Two days," the Vulcan said. "The fever broke, but you were still caught in the delirium."

"That was you --" she told him, "that helped me find my way out." He nodded.

"At times, such illness can cause a retreat into the mind. If not safely escorted one can become trapped there."

"Who hit you?" Ballinger asked cautiously.

She stared at him incredulously. "I don't know -- don't you know? I thought --"

Ballinger shook his head. "Either someone's lying, or we have an extra -- someone or something -- running around that we don't know about."

"No other life forms have shown on the tricorder, other than --" Seral began.

Joel chuckled. "He's being facetious," he told the healer. "Obviously someone is lying."

"And hiding it well," Ballinger added.

Sylvia sighed. "Why me?" she asked rhetorically.

Joel shrugged. "You said you were a courier -- kept wanting to check it when you were sick. Maybe they want whatever you were carrying."

"I lost that in the scramble for the pod," she said, not even thinking twice about the lie. "And I never carry important stuff -- never used to, that is." A wave of weakness washed over her and she sagged back against Seral's supporting arm. He eased her to the mattress and stood up.

"You must rest now," he told her. "I will prepare you something to eat, but try to sleep."

The room wavered and darkened. Sylvia's last sight was of Seral herding the others through the curtain.

A watch-Vulcan, she thought affectionately, just before she slept.

Waking again, she blinked -- it was dark. She sat up slowly, then froze when something moved by the door. The eterno-lamp came on to reveal Seral sitting on the floor, a container of water beside him. "How do you feel?" he asked.

"Just tired, and weak as a kitten," she replied quietly. "Did — while I was — did I say anything about the packet?"

"Nothing about its location," he answered. "You were quite worried about its safety, though."

She breathed a sigh of relief. "You really couldn't find out who hit me?"

He sighed. "Someone is quite adept at concealing the physical reactions that normally indicate prevarication. I was using the tricorder while the incident was being discussed, but no one exhibited physical signs outside of the normal range."

Sylvia edged around to lean against the wall, tremulously aware that she needed the support. "That must have been an interesting session."

"Indeed. It became quite volatile when Ballinger accused Donner of the misdeed."

"Oh, god."

"He stated that Donner must have been enraged beyond reason by your refusal to his advances —"

"I don't want to hear this—"

He paused stiffly. "I only meant to prepare you for the attitudes you will face with the others."

She shook her head. "I'm sorry. I want to know, I just -- I wish it had never happened. Ballinger persuaded me to tell him what was going on with Donner."

Seral stood up. "I understand. Would you care for something to eat?"

Sylvia became aware of the fierce demands of her stomach. "I think that would help," she admitted. "Do I have to say here?"

"Not unless you prefer it. It is approximately 3.5 hours before dawn, and everyone else is asleep. Do you need assistance?"

She considered. "I don't know. Let me try —" Suiting action to words, she stood up, one hand against the wall for balance, and waited until the spinning room slowed somewhat. "Maybe a little...."

He put one arm around her back for support, and she made it into the common room, although she admitted to herself that she was mostly carried the last several feet. Seral settled her into a chair and busied himself for a moment at the fireplace before sitting down beside her.

"What's the general consensus?" she asked quietly.

His answer was equally subdued. "Because there is no available or easily identifiable culprit, the general sentiment is that it was an unfortunate accident."

"Right," she agreed sarcastically. "Not a tree overhead, no large animals, but somehow something clobbered me there. Or maybe I did it to myself, and threw the weapon away before I passed out."

"It does seem rather absurd," he agreed. "I do not believe, however, that you will be abused for what happened."

He moved to the fire place and returned with a bowl of thin broth, barely steaming, which he encouraged her to drink. While she sipped it slowly, she watched the flickering light from the fireplace, and thought.

He must have stayed with me the whole time — he looks like someone who's ended a vigil. "This is good," she told him, letting the liquid's emanating heat warm her face. Vulcans must be able to go forever on very little sleep — like an economy aircar. She suppressed a snicker. Maybe Ballinger was right. "Protective," he said. But why? Gods know, I am starting to — damn. I can't love him. I've been hurt too many times before to try it again.

The bowl was taken from her fingers, interrupting her. "Would you like more?"

"Huh?" She looked at the empty container he held, then let awareness of her stomach intrude. "Not now. But I do need to —"

For once she was grateful to see the Vulcan understood the unspoken words. He steadied her as she walked outside, and waited patiently to help her return to the comfort of the fire. She noticed that he sat much closer to the fire than she could tolerate, although the heat was especially welcome after her shaky trip in the chilly air.

She turned back to her contemplation of him. He was watching the fire, his face expressionless. This — enigma — was closed to her, unreadable, and cool, although he had been warm and reassuring in her delirium. She thought back to the fever-induced terror she had felt, and the aura she had paid almost no attention to when he had appeared to lead her out of the fog.

Unlike the facade he had presented to the world, the light she had visualized as his presence had exuded warmth, concern, and a strong protectiveness that she had not expected. She could understand a certain degree of guardianship he might feel — not only as a healer, but because the male/female attitude was still prevalent in many races. This had been different, somehow; it wasn't the "strong take care of the weak" attitude she had encountered before. This sensation had a selfish feeling to it — a personal interest, somehow, in her well-being.

Her head dropped, bringing her sharply back to reality. Where had that come from? Why would he be so interested in her, other than the manner in which any doctor regards a patient? She refocused on the fire, saw that it had burned down a bit. She must have been dozing.

Seral had not moved. He reminded her somehow of a cat sitting in the sun to absorb its warmth. The slight chill of the night air had penetrated to where she was sitting, and she pondered for a short time whether she should move closer to the fire or go back to bed. She had almost decided in favor of the fire when Seral stirred, went through a restrained stretch, and stood.

"You should be sleeping," he told her. "Two days of fever are not to be passed off lightly. He extended a hand to help her stand, and waited.

Suddenly self-conscious, Sylvia accepted his hand and pulled herself up, thankful for his solid strength. Dizziness swirled around her as she gained her feet and she wobbled, to be steadied immediately by his firm grasp. "I do believe you're right," she said ruefully, and allowed him to lead her back to the waiting mattress.

She listened sleepily as the Vulcan banked the fire, and then waited until he took up his position by the door. Securely watched, she slept.

DAY 34

Sylvia sat up, and noted with pleasant surprise that the room no longer spun when she opened her eyes. It was daylight, the curtain had been left slightly open, and she could hear the sound of an axe biting deeply into wood. She stood up carefully, then walked into the common room and found it empty.

A thick broth was steaming over the low fire, and she dipped a bowl into it and drank the mild liquid while leaning against the doorframe.

Thonar was chopping wood, using the axe with a skill and intensity that unnerved her. Joel and Seral were working with a strange contraption that had fibers intertwined through parts of it, and as an end product, a thin cord was turning onto a make-shift spool. Joel noticed her and waved, and Seral immediately came toward her, tricorder at the ready.

"How do you feel?" he asked, watching the monitor.

"Better. Not so shaky." She waited until he had finished before returning for another bowl of the broth. "Hungry."

"Another day of conservative function should return you to full health."

"Doctor's orders?" she smiled.

"Of course," he replied, no hint of amusement in his demeanor.

Joel approached bouncily. "We've finished the wheel — sorta. Come and see." She followed him over, listening half-heartedly to his explanation of shortcuts and inventive replacements in their design, and praised the device when he stopped for breath. He paused, looked at her examiningly. "How are you doing?"

"According to our medical expert, I need another day of rest," she replied lightly. "But I still get a little trembly when I try to do too much." She wobbled, then sat down hard enough to bring tears to her eyes.

"Like now?" he asked solicitously.

She nodded, brushed the moisture away. "I'll be OK. Oh, I missed my day at the pod. Who took it?"

"I did," the boy replied. At her look, he continued defensively. "Well, Donner wouldn't, Seral couldn't, and Thonar looked too mad to even ask. Ballinger feels responsible, so he was keeping an eye on you too. I made myself look good, and volunteered."

Sylvia laughed, earning a dirty look from Thonar, who was now attacking logs. Seral joined them, and began operating the "wheel" again, producing a finer thread than Joel had.

"We will soon have enough of this to begin manufacturing fabric. The weather will become slightly cooler for a time. It will not reduce the availability of foodstuffs, but the climate could become slightly uncomfortable."

"Oh, yeah — Vulcan's a hot planet," Joel interjected. "This is probably already kinda cold for you."

Seral did not acknowledge the comment. "We will need replacement clothing first, and perhaps some warmer blankets. Can you formulate patterns to follow for such items?"

Joel nodded. "Easy ones, yeah. Do you have the tools I showed you?"

"Those must be carved. Wood hard enough to be sturdy but soft enough to be worked has been difficult to find."

Sylvia sighed. "I guess I should learn how to do that."

"It's not hard," Joel consoled her. "Be thankful you're not getting into what the Rigellians call weaving. That'll make you crazy. This stuff is relatively new compared to most needlework — invented about a century ago. It makes the flattest, smoothest fabric possible without a loom."

Sylvia laughed again. "Now you're beginning to sound like a tutor yourself," she told Joel.

Seral finished the fiber he had available and stood. "You have been up long enough," he told Sylvia sternly. "Go inside and sit down." He walked away and Sylvia saluted his back. "Yes, housemaster," she said solemnly.

"What?" Joel asked.

"Oh, housemaster or housemistress was the title of whoever was in charge of the creche where I was raised. You never questioned orders, just did what they said, or you were sorry for days. He has that same attitude when giving orders." She sighed. "I guess I ought to go sit down — he must know what he's talking about."

"So they say," Joel answered cryptically.

Feet propped up, Sylvia was dozing by the fire when the voices woke her.

"Females belong apart!" Donner was insisting. "They are corrupting, unclean and only work under the strictest of overseers. She should be — housed — elsewhere!"

"Come on!" Ballinger retorted hotly. "We can't build another building just for one person! You're the only one who wants this anyway. And besides, she pulls her share—"

Thonar broke in, his lisp accentuated so badly that Sylvia could not understand him.

"The hell it will!" Ballinger almost hissed. "We're still civilized beings here — we're not setting up anything like that against anyone's will." He paused. Sylvia heard a thump. "Damn it, man, I thought better of you than that!"

Thonar's reply was again incomprehensible. Joel broke in angrily.

"You bunch have as much tact as a Gorn! She's sleeping right there!"

Sylvia closed her eyes, visualizing the startled silence. She wasn't yet sure what they were arguing about, but she was certain she didn't want to know. The light was fading, and she knew they'd be coming in soon for the dinner Seral had cooked. He had refused to allow her to expend even a minimal effort of assistance.

Should she continue to pretend to sleep? She looked up to meet Donner's eyes. "I believe you should have your own dwelling," he said flatly. "Where you could live and — entertain — privately." He had slanted the word nastily, and there was no doubt as to what he meant.

Anger fueled an adrenalin rush in her and she jumped to her feet. "Just because I told you 'no' doesn't mean I've told everyone else 'yes'!" she hissed at him. Shaking, she walked past the surprised group, passing Seral in the clearing, and headed blindly into the trees.

She leaned against a tree after walking for a few moments, her arms crossed over her waist. She would not survive here — not with Donner's hatred so obvious. He would turn the others against her and they would make her already shaky existence here unbearable. She fought back a sob — she could not let loose when still this close to the clearing.

"You should not be out here." The statement startled her, but Sylvia recognized Seral's voice and sagged back against the tree. At least Seral — no, she never quite knew what to expect from him. But pain and humiliation she did not expect; she had finally come to trust him.

"I'm all right," she replied. But her voice, tight and tense, revealed the lie.

"Tell me," he insisted. His hands came down on her shoulders, resting gently, comfortingly. The warm touch was distracting, and Sylvia was tempted to lose herself in that warmth.

"I — can't," she murmured, slowly becoming aware of the heat radiating from his body and reflecting against her back. She knew that his body temperature was much higher than hers, or any other Human's, but — he must be standing very close for her to feel such heat.

Almost as if in response to her thoughts, one hand began to move slowly down her arm, barely touching her skin, and leaving an electric tingle wherever it passed. The other hand had not moved, was still cupped warmly and securely on the curve of her shoulder. It began to tighten and then relax, the gentle rhythmic massage beginning to loosen the tension in her back.

He moved his hands to the nape of her neck and began rubbing the spine with his thumbs, his fingers curling forward to rest on her collarbone. Sylvia sighed, her earlier anger forgotten, and tilted her head backward, beginning to lose herself in the soothing touch. Seral's thumbs worked slowly to the side of her neck, then he swiftly moved to a position in front of her, his fingers continuing the massage her still-tight shoulders. The heat he radiated began to penetrate her body as she slowly became aware of his change of position.

A hot breath on her cheek warned her, then she felt lips brush against her forehead, her temple, then linger at her ear. Slowly, as if unwilling, Sylvia's hands moved up to rest on the solid chest before her, luxuriating in the feel of him, and gradually beginning to explore.

Shivering deliciously as he smoothed and then nibbled her earlobes, she ran her hands languorously over his firm arms, his broad chest, and down to rest on his waist, slender and rock-hard.

Seral's hands took a leisurely journey down her back, working the tension from the muscles along her spine, and stopping for a time on her flanks, long fingers reaching to cup her buttocks, then settling about her waist as if they would never leave.

The sensation of his teeth on her ear was overwhelming, and Sylvia moaned deeply in her throat and moved fractionally closer to him, her hands becoming a bit more urgent on his waist. Her senses were whirling, her insides melting from the

astonishing sensations Seral was raising in her. She reveled in his touch — in being cherished, cared for, and wanted. Accepted by at least one — she gasped, and put her arms around his neck, pulling his mouth to cover hers.

He had plainly not kissed before, so she demonstrated as best she could, still caught up in the swirling maelstrom of touch and emotion. Her tongue followed the full outline of his lips, then brushed against his teeth, before slipping through them to establish contact with the delightfully different interior of his mouth. At the same time, her fingernails raked delicately down his back, and now he inhaled spasmodically, then tightened his arms to draw her body full length against his.

The shock of that small movement was so great, the impact of flesh to flesh so strong that Sylvia could not have denied its influence on her, even had she wished it. Her breasts felt swollen, unable to contain her arousal, her abdomen had become a melting furnace, and her thighs moved her forward to press against him even more firmly than the hands on her back demanded.

A branch snapped loudly somewhere near, and the spell was broken. Sylvia felt an almost nauseous disappointment sweep through her as the Vulcan gently put her away. His voice was rough. "It is late," he said. "We should return — we still do not know who struck you."

Fighting back tears, Sylvia agreed. Her arousal was still hot and strong, the touch of Seral's hand on her arm as he led her through the darkness to the clearing only aggravating the frustration. When the cabin's outlines were discernable against the sky, she stopped. "I don't understand. What — why?"

He paused for a moment. "I cannot explain," he finally said. "Not now. We must return."

Stunned, her senses whirling, she allowed herself to be led to the door, and settled grumbling into a chair. She was painfully aware of Donner's knowing stare, but pretended not to see any of the varied expressions around her.

She accepted a bowl of soup from Seral, but would not look up to meet his eyes, and ate quietly, hearing only the small and varied sounds as the others ate. The noise made as something slammed down on the table startled her, as it did the others. She turned around to see everyone looking at Ballinger.

He was standing up, his anger evident in his face. "What the hell is wrong with us?" he demanded furiously. "We are all — supposedly — civilized beings. Adults, save one, and mature. But this last couple of days reminds me of a bunch of children playing in the dirt." He glared around. "Are we mature, responsible adults, or are we babies? Do we need someone to come and wipe our noses and swat our behinds when we get nasty with each other?" He sat down. "I thought we were better than that. I hope to god the Feds find us soon, or all they'll have will be a bunch of corpses." Abashed, they all looked away.

In the embarrassed silence, the knock on the door sounded with frightening clarity. Seral stood up while everyone else was still stunned, and moved to the door, opening it to reveal a dark-haired young man, phaser drawn, wearing the uniform of Federation Starfleet security.

"Anybody home?" he asked, then grinned, obviously pleased at his wit.

"Only a bunch of corpses," Joel muttered sourly.

Sylvia watched while the others crowded around the young lieutenant and his two colleagues. The noise of their excited conversation became so much babble, and she looked back to the fireplace, trying to quell a surge of trembling nausea.

Faintly she heard a tricorder whir, a hypo's hiss, and the crawling sensation subsided. She looked into astonishingly blue eyes and frowned in confusion. "Are you all right?" the newcomer asked. When she didn't speak, he continued. "I'm Leonard McCoy, ship's doctor. You come on up to the sickbay with me and we'll get you settled in." His accent was strange, a drawl she'd never heard before, but she allowed him to pull her to her feet.

She looked around, saw Seral, relaxed slightly at his reassuring nod, and leaned against the doctor as he flipped open his communicator.

After materializing, McCoy waited until everyone else had stepped down before he led Sylvia to the steps. She was watching Seral, who had been in front of her for the pickup. He stepped down, hesitated, and drew himself stiffly erect before continuing out of the small room. Looking for an explanation for his puzzling behavior, she saw only another Vulcan behind the control console of the transporter room.

"Come on," McCoy murmured comfortingly, "not all that far to Sickbay. Then you can rest, and tell me what happened."

Sylvia concentrated on keeping her feet moving in a straight line. "So much happened —" she said, her words slurring despite her best efforts. "You'll have to be more specific."

"Time for that later," he replied. "Almost there — Ferguson! Help me get her up on a bed."

She had collapsed abruptly, almost sliding to the floor until a second pair of hands caught at her and she was settled onto a bed. Gentle fingers probed the slightly swollen area of her temple. "When did this happen?"

"Two — no, three days ago. Someone hit me." Her energy no longer needed for walking, Sylvia found conversation somewhat easier.

"Hit you?" he demanded indignantly. "Why? Oh — here's why, I'll bet." A scanner whirred. "Are you a courier?"

"You found it — oh, don't tell the others. Someone wants it — I don't know who." She opened her eyes, focused on his sympathetic features. "What's wrong with me?"

He smiled. "After that bump on the head and all you've been through, you've just never had a chance to get any reserves built back up. Simple exhaustion, that's all." He patted her hand. "Stay here a day; we'll get all the things you need back into you, and you'll be fine."

A muted thump-thumping woke her, and she lay unmoving for a while, listening to the sounds of engines, ventilators, and monitors. A ship — they'd said the Enterprise. So they were off that wretched planet, on her way — home? What passed for home, anyway. The darkness brightened slowly, and a tall, brunette nurse walked in, carrying a professional air along with a tray.

"Feeling better?" she asked briskly, and sat the tray down, checked the panel over her head while Sylvia reached for the juice. "Go ahead, it's yours," she said encouragingly. "I'm Nurse Chapel; I'm going to check you over and make sure you're all right this morning. The captain wants to debrief all of you separately — they never did pin down what happened to make that ship you were on blow up."

While the nurse talked and watched her carefully, Sylvia ate most of the breakfast, and was surprised to realize that she actually felt good. She said so when asked, and relaxed at the doctor's warm smile. "Good. There's a 'fresher and fabricator right in there; you can punch up something from the ship's stores. The variety is pretty limited, but it'll do until you can get groundside."

Bathed, scrubbed, feeling really clean, and wearing the first different garment for a month, Sylvia felt whole again. She had even managed to coax the fabricator into supplying her with some cosmetics and a coverall in her choice of color. She stepped through the small room she'd slept in to the main sickbay reception area, and looked around. A young man in hospital whites approached her solicitously. "Miss Collins? I'm Ensign Chan. I'm supposed to take you to Briefing Room Three."

"Lead on," she said, and fell into step beside him. "I've never seen a ship like this," she admitted, admiring the shiny hexagonal corridors.

"Probably not. She spent half a year in drydock, only been out again just over a year. Here we are — Briefing Room Three. Captain Kirk will be inside." He turned and was gone, and Sylvia moved hesitantly toward the door. It opened,

revealing the Vulcan she'd seen before in the transporter room, and a dynamic smiling man she assumed must be the captain. An air of harnessed energy lay just under the charm he exuded, and she warmed to it as he got her settled comfortably into a chair.

"What we need, for the investigation and the records, is everything you can tell us — from the time you ship left until when we found you."

She wrinkled her nose slightly. "You must have already heard it five times now —"

"But not from you," the Vulcan interjected. "Every individual sees a different piece of the whole around them. You may have seen or heard something the others missed, or some item that would clarify or explain a detail in question."

She shrugged. "I've filed enough reports for my company — I guess I should be used to it now." She began detailing the day of the explosion, stopping now and again to answer a question posed by the captain or first officer.

Several hours later they finished, and Sylvia sighed with relief. Her head had begun to pound, and she rubbed at her temple, trying to be unobtrusive. The captain, however, saw the motion. "I'm sorry," he assured her. "I hadn't thought it would take this long, and McCoy's gonna have my hide for tiring you out." He looked at the first officer. "Anything else, Spock?"

"Not at this time" Spock answered, clasping his hands together.

"Then I think you're ready for some rest," Kirk said. "If we need more information, we'll come talk to you later."

"It shows?" she asked ruefully. "I guess I'll go find the doctor."

"Have you been shown a cabin yet?" Kirk asked. She shook her head. "We've got one for you, but McCoy wanted you in Sickbay overnight. I'll take you there now, it's closer, and he can come to you."

Fortunately for her suddenly trembling legs, her room was nearby, and the bed was invitingly comfortable. The captain signalled Dr. McCoy and sat with her until the grumbling physician arrived. The doctor promptly chased the captain out and scolded Sylvia thoroughly while he gave her a sedative and told her to get some rest.

In spite of the sedative she did not sleep, but lay staring at the ceiling. Had the ship been sabotaged originally? Perhaps her packet was still important enough to be of value to her company.

And where was Seral? Since coming aboard the ship she had seen nothing of the Vulcan. From his behavior on the planet, she would have expected at least one visit while she was in Sickbay. Ballinger had been right, she realized, comparing Seral's behavior to that of the Vulcan first officer. He had been hovering, paying more attention to her than any Vulcan would. Maybe it hadn't been her imagination that he had been promoting a relationship.

She sighed, turned over, pounded her pillow into a pile, and rested her chin on it. What now? She could not deny an attraction — was it only last night that he had been so convincing while holding her and kissing her? His arousal had been real, she knew. What was she willing to do about it? Am I aggressive enough to go to him and find out what he intended? The question was disturbing, too much so. She knew that if she was going to do something, it would have to be now. After sleeping it would be too easy to put off, to rationalize away her insights or decision.

She looked at the chronometer. It was over an hour since McCoy had administered the sedative and it wasn't having much effect, so she took a deep breath and stood up. Not thinking too hard about what she intended, she asked the computer for the location of the room Seral had been given. On second thought, she also asked for directions.

Standing outside his door, she twisted her hands nervously, her resolve almost deserting her, but a passing crewmember took the problem from her.

"You push this one," a voice over her shoulder said. She turned to see a tall girl in an Engineering uniform, who smiled, leaned forward, and pressed the buzzer. "See ya," she waved, and continued walking down the corridor.

Before Sylvia could run, as all of her instincts were demanding, she heard a wrenchingly familiar voice. "Enter."

She took another deep breath and walked in, at first noticing only that their rooms were laid out in exactly the same way. Seral was standing by the table, and seemed slightly surprised to see her. "Sit down, please," he said, and held a chair for her. Her heart pounding, Sylvia sat down, afraid to meet his inquiring eyes.

"Are you feeling better?" he asked evenly. She looked up sharply. His voice had been perfectly flat, devoid of any concern — he might have been reading off a string of numbers.

"Quite a bit, thank you," she replied. She gritted her teeth, then took the plunge. "I came to talk to you — about yesterday." She looked away. "You never said — why you couldn't explain."

He stood up, walked across the room. "It is difficult — I would prefer...."

She clenched her fists. "I thought...you wanted me, that you were interested...."

She watched his shoulders tighten. "I did not mean to...entice you...."

"Then just what did you intend with all that?" Sylvia's voice was low and tense.

"I...needed you." He seemed reluctant to admit it.

"Why? You didn't want me to think you wanted me, but you needed me?" Her voice betrayed her confusion, slipping higher and higher.

He sighed, turned back to face her. "I knew that if we were not rescued within a matter of months, I would not be able to return to Vulcan before the Mating Time. I...preferred not to die from it."

"What's that — a 'Mating Time'?" She was genuinely curious.

He frowned ever so slightly. "The...reproductive urge...in my race; it has become a demand. At certain intervals, if not fulfilled — I will die."

"Then you tried to make me love you — do when the time came — this was just for sex?" She stood up, turned away from him. "Why didn't you just tell me? Probably — to save a doctor for all of us — I'd have done it."

"It must be a permanent joining," he returned stiffly.

"So you could have asked me to marry you!" she cried. "But you had to manipulate me — to make me feel like you were in love with me, like you cared!"

He whirled around, his eyes blazing. "I could have taken you by force."

"You should have!" she screamed, goaded beyond endurance. "It would have been easier for me to deal with rape than another manipulation, someone else using me for their own ends. I've been through this before, and it hurts!" She became aware that her hands were stinging, and opened her clenched fists to reveal blood welling from the half-circles her nails had gouged. It refueled her anger and pain. "You never stopped — you never bothered to think of how it might affect me — you're supposed to heal people, not hurt them!"

The Vulcan put out a hand, but she pulled back violently. "Somewhere — I found that your well being has become important to me."

Sylvia laughed, a harsh, bitter sound. "Oh, come on! It's a little late for that now! Just leave me alone. I've survived this all before — maybe I'll make it this time, too."

She stalked out of the room, then collapsed in the corridor, crying brokenly. Great choking sobs pulled at her, and she was unable to stop, even when someone spoke to her urgently, then signalled for a doctor. She was barely aware of being taken to Sickbay and examined, but she felt another sedative enter her system, and welcomed the blackness of unconsciousness.

* * * * *

After a moment, Seral followed Sylvia, but froze when he saw her collapse, saw an older man in a lab smock bend over her, then reach for the intercom. He took a deep breath, and realized disconcertedly that he had lost control. He watched the doctor approach rapidly, and waited as they carried her away.

Returning to his cabin, he assumed a position conducive to meditation. But his mind would not settle, and he had to resort to elementary exercises to calm himself.

Item. He had placed the value of his life over that of another's.

Item. He had shamelessly manipulated another being to serve his needs, regardless of that being's emotional needs or well-being.

Item. Having achieved his purpose, he had abandoned the person once he had been assured of his ability to reach Vulcan in time to save his life, should....

Item. The person he had used so recklessly had suffered at the least a physical collapse, brought on by emotional trauma. Said trauma was inflicted by himself — a Vulcan who prided himself on understanding IDIC and those races who weren't Vulcan.

Item. That rounded ear, so soft, such a unique piece of flesh — NO! Discipline!

Regretfully, he told himself that this must be considered. He allowed his memory to focus on the few startling minutes they had stood close and he had moved his mouth over the delicately curved top of her ear, how his arms had involuntarily tightened and pulled her closer when she had penetrated his mouth —

He wrenched his thought away from that, tried to be dispassionate as he reviewed the initial contact. He had touched her, to calm her, to (—shame—) make her begin to feel at ease with his touch. Somehow he had connected with her reaction feedback and become caught both in her response to the physical sensations, and his growing awareness of the almost painful pleasure of the contact.

Abruptly he slammed a fist into the deck, the pain serving to divert him. Resolutely he turned his thoughts to his forthcoming return to Vulcan. He would be almost seven years behind in medical research and advancements, and he would have to re-establish his place at the Medical Center, and in his clan. His family, his children would have thought him dead all these years.

It would also be necessary to arrange for a surrogate, his Time would be approaching within a year (a flash of lonely anguish at the thought of the empty home, how right Sylvia would have been there, the bright Human touches she would have brought —) No. He would not have a surrogate, not knowing that she would be there in his mind, in his thoughts, when his body began again to react to the approaching Pon Farr with surprising fantasies and visions.

He knew that one Vulcan male had married a Terran woman, but he had not followed the details, except to notice later that it had apparently been successful. Would a second such marriage be equally successful?

He leaned back on his heels. She would assume that his offer was prompted by a sense of duty, or perhaps guilt. He must find a way to convince her that his desire for her (against all Tradition!) was real, his caring genuine. This would be the most difficult aspect.

But it must be soon. If he delayed for long, she would close him out, erect a formidable barrier against him. Painful thought it might be, he must move while her wound was still fresh.

A new consideration: when comparing their respective ages, and life expectancies, it seemed most likely that should she accept him, she would live at least until advancing age took the Mating Drive from him. And he would not be alone, as he had for the last 4.8 years. He realized painfully that his solitude had not been pleasant, merely easier than finding another mate.

His intercom sounded, breaking into his reverie as the decision solidified.

"Seral, this is Dr. McCoy. I understand that you're a healer on Vulcan—"

"Yes, Doctor. May I assist you in some way?"

"Well, I just got some new tapes, and there were some items that could use a bit of clarification for me."

"I would be pleased to help. Shall I come to your office?"

"Please. Do you know where it is?"

"Yes. Is this a convenient time?"

"Now is perfect. Thanks. McCoy out."

Excellent, Seral thought. He had tried once to get into Sickbay, but was refused, a stern-eyed female doctor expressly forbidding him. But McCoy was the CMO — surely he would allow him to see Sylvia.

He looked at the chronometer and was mildly surprised to see that several hours had passed since he had stood in the corridor and watched Sylvia collapse. He went through the exercises designed to return his mind and body to full readiness, and made his way to the ship's sickbay.

"Thank you, Seral, this really helps me out." McCoy sat back in his chair and turned the viewer off. "I'll get these notes circulated to my staff so we can have as many people as possible aware of these — exceptions."

"My knowledge may be out of date, Dr. McCoy," Seral said smoothly.

"Well, I suppose that if there have been any major advancements in the last seven years, I've got 'em in file," McCoy replied. "How long were you there — subjective time?"

"Only thirty-four days," Seral stated. "The statis field saved us from several years —" He faltered for a moment at the tangent his thoughts were taking, then pulled himself together. "— of surviving with minimal tools and rapidly failing equipment."

"Humm, yes." McCoy's face was bland, but Seral had the distinct suspicion that the doctor's mind was busy deciding whether or not to broach a difficult subject. He decided to save him the trouble.

"How is Miss Collins?"

McCoy's eyebrows shot up, reminding the Vulcan of the first officer. "She's all right. Some kind of emotional shock — she should wake up feeling a lot better."

"Excellent." The smugly satisfied word having escaped, Seral realized that he had betrayed himself. McCoy smiled ever so slightly.

"She'll be out from under the sedative soon. Would you care to see her?" There was no escaping those sharp eyes. He admitted defeat.

"Very much."

McCoy blinked, and stood up, waiting. "I'll show you where she is, if you want to wait." He led the Vulcan to a small room marked "Isolation". "She needs to rest," he explained, "and since we're not quarantining anyone right now, and it is the quietest —"

"Of course." Seral took the chair in the corner and prepared to wait, sighing in relief as McCoy dimmed the lights and closed the door behind him. He studied the woman on the bed, noting clinically that her color was better, her sleep easier than it had been during her hours of delirium.

He had heard a Tellarite cursing once at the Vulcan Science Academy, and had noticed that the being was quite calm after expressing his anger. Seral repeated the expletives in his mind, cursing his insensitivity, but they did not seem to help. He should have noticed while in the healing meld that Sylvia's emotional state was quite fragile, her barriers constructed against fear and humiliation. He had ignored, as taught, references to other relationships, strongly negative reactions. No wonder she had responded to his rejection as she did.

He watched as she sighed, stretched a bit, then relaxed back into sleep, a secretive smile curving the corners of her mouth. Would he ever have the chance to hold her again, to — Seral stood up, aghast at himself. Was it possible that his Time was upon him so soon? He could not yet detect physical changes on his own, so if it was beginning, he still had at least ten days before it became imperative.

Sylvia stretched again, one arm coming free of the blanket, reaching out in his direction. The Vulcan briefly entertained the idea that she was reaching for him, before discarding it firmly. It was not possible; she was sleeping and could not be aware of his presence. Perhaps if he were able to offer her what he had tried to assume — control of a life. Give her the control over his life, or his death, if she chose.

She stirred and he sat down, to be at eye level. Her eyelids fluttered, then opened, widening when she caught sight of him. "What are you doing here?" she asked softly. He could see, for all of her drug-induced relaxation, that her eyes were guarded, her expression wary. He decided to be blunt.

"To see you."

"I thought we already had this discussion."

"No. The last time we spoke, you came to me for an explanation. Now I come to you — with an offer of marriage." There, he had said it. She paled and sat up, drawing the blanket to her as if for comfort.

"Why? That — mating thing?"

"It is a factor. But not the most important one." He hesitated, years of training and Tradition stilling his tongue.

She was strangely calm, considering the aftermath of their last meeting.

"Well?"

"I find...that the thought of continuing life without you has no appeal for me. I...wish your presence in my home, in my life." This was more difficult than he had thought it would be.

"And in your bed? Or was that little session the other night just a fluke?" She shook her head. "I've learned a little more about Vulcans lately, and I don't know if I can live like that — no emotion, only touching when you're in your Drive. It'd be like living with a machine."

"Were you — displeased with my behavior on the planet?"

She looked away, and he saw a faint tinge of color come into her cheeks. "No. But you changed, on the ship. You're a different person now. And I don't seem to know the real you."

"Will you not take the chance to find out?"

Her voice was flat. "I don't know. The only thing keeping me calm right now is the sedative. I — I'll think about it, and let you know. Now I'd like some time alone."

He stood, and impulsively approached the bed. Giving into it, he leaned down and touched his lips to hers, and was astonished at the reaction in both of them. She trembled, then leaned against him, and he was overwhelmed with the desire to press her tightly to him. But her shaking hands pushed him away after a moment.

"I'll let you know," she repeated tremulously.

* * * * *

Dr. McCoy came in seconds after Seral had left, distracting her from her thoughts. She was grateful — she didn't feel like she could face the decision that she must now make. She concentrated on his bustling routine, watched him reading the scanner, and got dressed quickly after he'd left, then reported to his office as ordered.

McCoy soon entered, carrying a tray, and set it down on his desk near to her. "I don't usually do this," he assured her. "But you have been ignoring everything I've told you to do. So you're not leaving here until you finished everything here."

Obediently she ate the meal, but could not finish it, even under the doctor's reproving eyes. "That's fine," he told her. "Now. I know you've been through a lot. I saw the report you gave the captain. I also saw that some things had been left out — some of the things that are really hurting you right now. Do you want to tell me about it? You know it won't leave this office."

Sylvia looked away from the penetrating blue eyes. "Doctor, I -- don't know what to do." She told him the situation from beginning to end. "He -- was using me -- or going to. Now he says he wants to marry me! I don't understand it!"

"Did he say why?" McCoy urged gently.

"He said - in effect - that he didn't want to go on without me. But I thought Vulcans weren't like that - your first officer isn't!"

McCoy smiled gently. "Boney, Vulcans are the galaxy's greatest actors. They put up the best facade -- such a good one that you never realize it's all a front, unless something happens to crack it open. And most times they can find a reasonable explanation for it, and convince you that it'll never happen again in a million years." He gestured toward the door. "I've been on this ship with a Vulcan, and had enough Vulcans as patients to know. You just have to understand them enough that once it's over, to pretend in front of other people that you never saw it."

"But -- what kind of a life can I expect living with a Vulcan?" she almost moaned.

McCoy patted her hand. "That's up to you. Every individual is different, and a marriage is what you make of it." He frowned slightly, and a shadow seemed to cross his face briefly. "But if you want it -- and him -- badly enough to give it your best try, I'd tell you to do it."

Sylvia thought for a minute. This kind man had really not given her any answers, but he had helped her to put things in perspective. He apparently saw her relax slightly, for he stood up, and waited while she did the same.

"Now," he said, "back to your room for some more sleep. This time you're staying here for a while, until I'm sure you're rested."

She slept dreamlessly this time, and woke during the ship's night. She considered getting up, but decided against it, as McCoy might not appreciate being roused to discharge her. She didn't feel like reading, so she re-dimmed the lights in the small room and tried to go back to sleep.

Somewhere in the stage between awareness and actual sleep, she heard a soft hiss. But when the lights didn't brighten even a bit, her inner alarm sounded and she lay unmoving, feigning sleep. The softest of rustles told her that someone was indeed in the room. She felt her light blanket pulled away and decided to move. She stretched, yawned as if awakening, and the lights came up slowly. To her surprise, she saw Joel sitting in the chair in the corner.

"Hello," he said quietly. His voice sounded lower, and different somehow. She yawned again, deliberately, and sat up.

"Hi yourself."

"You feeling better?" he asked. "No one was sure what was wrong -- you still in Sickbay for so long."

"Just exhaustion after that bump on the head," she replied. "The doctor wants to make sure I'm all right."

"Let's quit playing games." Shockingly, his voice now sounded like a mature man's. "I want your packet, and the formula for dissolving the synthetic covering."

"Joel, I don't understand." She shook her head, trying for a glimpse of a signalling device. There it was, behind her and to the left.

"You're carrying information I've been sent to retrieve," he said menacingly. "Your company's representative is waiting at Starbase 10. And my organization has let me know that none of the duplicate couriers got through. You have the only copy. Now what's the formula?"

"I never know that!" she protested. "If I knew, I'd be of no value as a courier. Only the attendant chemist knows, and he puts it under lock in the security computer."

"But it's under your retrieval code," Joel said coldly. "Give me the code and my informant will have the formula soon enough."

She sighed, and leaned back, trying inconspicuously to get within reach of the comm button. "You know I can't do that."

He stood up, moved to her side. "Sylvia, you're not a bad person. I'll only give you one more chance."

She changed the subject. "Was it you who searched my things, and hit me? I liked you!"

"You liked my cover personality. Tell me your retrieval code."

She lunged for the button but he caught her wrists. His wiry body was surprisingly strong, his child's face impassive in the struggle. Sylvia caught her breath to scream, then gasped in pain as Joel forced her arm up behind her back, her elbow bent awkwardly.

"I'll break it," he warned. "I'm going to try to remove your packet. But if I can't get it, at least your people won't have it. And you'll be mysteriously dead."

Sylvia twisted and lunged again for the call button, trying to ignore the dull crack and sudden agony in her shoulder. Her fingers caught the button and she saw the light flash. "Help me!" she gasped, then cried out in fear as Joel fell across her and broke the connection.

He released her, and reached for his belt, a thin, strong tie. "No time to arrange an accident now," he said, his voice emotionless. He approached, holding the belt taut, and looked down with determined eyes.

The pause was his undoing. Even as he wrapped the thong about her throat and tightened it against the protective fingers of her left hand, the door slid open and two crewman dashed in to pull him away. He fought them silently, but one of them finally stopped him by simply punching him hard in the abdomen. Breathless, Joel was easily pulled from the room.

Captain Kirk, First Officer Spock, and Doctor McCoy reached the room together, and McCoy waved a scanner about Sylvia while Kirk unwound the thin belt from her neck. Spock stepped out of the room and Sylvia heard him questioning the two crewmen who held Joel, then order the prisoner to the brig.

"You've got a fracture of the diaphysis humerus and a dislocated shoulder, but I'm sure you felt that," McCoy told her. "Can't I leave you alone for a minute?" As he spoke, he was pressing a hypo to her shoulder, and the pain subsided almost instantly.

"Take it easy, we'll get your shoulder back in place and that bone knitted before you could —" His eyes twinkled, and he smiled. "Well, maybe not. But it'll be quick."

* * * * *

"Now." McCoy patted her arm — her good one. "Take it easy for two or three days, give that bone a chance to finish healing." He walked her to the sickbay entrance. "Young lady, if you so much as scratch yourself, I'm confining you to Sickbay until we reach Starbase 10. We have almost twenty hours, I think. So you be careful."

Sylvia smiled wanly. "I'll be good," she assured him, feeling like a small child caught stealing sweets.

She stood outside in the corridor for several moments, then realized that, almost independently, her mind had made a decision. She found Seral's cabin with only a few wrong turns, and pressed the buzzer, her stomach turning nervously as she waited for him to respond.

The door opened to reveal him standing before it, and he tilted his head to one side when he saw her. "Come in," he said, his voice even. She had the odd impression that this man — no, this Vulcan — was scared, deep inside where he couldn't even admit it to himself. She sat down at the table, and waited for him to sit before she spoke.

"I — have to know more. I want to know what it will be like if I agree to marry you."

He had obviously not expected the question, although he barely showed any change of facial expression. "I...have a large house, in Vulcan's capital city,

near the Medical Center, and another one in the desert near my clan home." He looked around, as if, thought Sylvia, he didn't know what else to say. "I...travel often, three to four times per Standard Year, although I will need to spend several months studying —"

Sylvia interrupted. "What about me? Do I just keep your house, entertain, work, what? What will this be like for me?"

"I do not know. If you prefer to continue your courier work, you can. There is a large Human and non-Vulcan settlement in the city, including schools, businesses — whatever you would find on most planets."

"Children? What are the chances for a Vulcan/Human child? Do you want children?" She stood, pushed her chair away. "There is so much about you I don't know. How can I make this kind of decision just based on what seems like a physical attraction?"

She turned around, then jumped backward. Seral had moved silently while her back was turned, and startled her. "I will do it —" she said impulsively, "— under one condition."

His face became guarded. "What condition do you impose?"

She watched him carefully. "I'll marry you, under a mutually revocable, one-year contract, with an open option for a permanent contract when the year expires." His expression did not change, but he seated himself at the table again.

"Why do you insist on the term contract?" he asked warily.

Sylvia sat down also, forcing his eyes to her. Her uncertainty was gone now, she was sure how to proceed. Only blatant honesty would suffice. She had to be certain that he knew from the beginning where she stood. "Because I can't commit myself to a lifetime with someone I know so little about. If at the end of one year, we both still want this, I'll contract for a nonrevocable lifetime marriage."

Seral looked at his hands for a moment, then back up at her. "This is the only condition you impose?"

She nodded, her trepidation suddenly returning.

He nodded also. "In order to fulfill the terms of a Federation contract, we cannot be married under Vulcan laws. When we arrive at Starbase 10, I will make the arrangements." He looked at her intently. "Is this agreeable to you?"

Sylvia closed her eyes. A year of her life with him, for good or bad — she had never been one to run out on a contract. But still — in spite of all that had happened — she wanted to know if this could work. If she refused it, she would wonder all her life if this was the one chance she might have had for a successful relationship with someone.

"Yes." Her voice shook on the syllable, and she watched the slight shaking of her hands. Seral stood up, moved behind her, and put his palms on her shoulders.

"There is something I must tell you, however," he said. His hands were warm, as she remembered, and they moved slightly up and down. "The — reproductive drive that I spoke of — it is beginning to take effect — much sooner than expected. I believe the statis field —"

"Don't tell me," Sylvia broke in, her body beginning to respond to the subtle pressure and warmth on her shoulders. "Show me." The hands tightened to an almost painful grip for an instant, then loosened as she stood up and faced him.

He ran his fingers through her hair, tilted her head back, and leaned forward, touching his mouth gently to hers. She became aware of his great strength — and the intercomm sounded a demand for attention. Sylvia shuddered, feeling again that horrible disappointment as the Vulcan turned to answer the call.

It was the First Officer. "Greetings, Seral. I have some information for Miss Collins, but I have been unable to locate her. Do you know of her whereabouts at this time?"

"She is here, Commander Spock." Sylvia could almost see the uplifted eyebrow and her mood changed abruptly. She had trouble suppressing a snicker as she moved into the range of the pickup.

"Commander?"

"I have some information that might interest you. I have researched the being calling himself Joel Hardesty. He is a Dohlian, a race that matures quite late in life. Their members look like adolescents well into their hundredth year, but their minds and personalities mature at the same rate as Terrans. He was employed by a security corporation based on Tenassah. That corporation had quite a reputation for unscrupulous methods, although criminal charges have been impossible to prove until now."

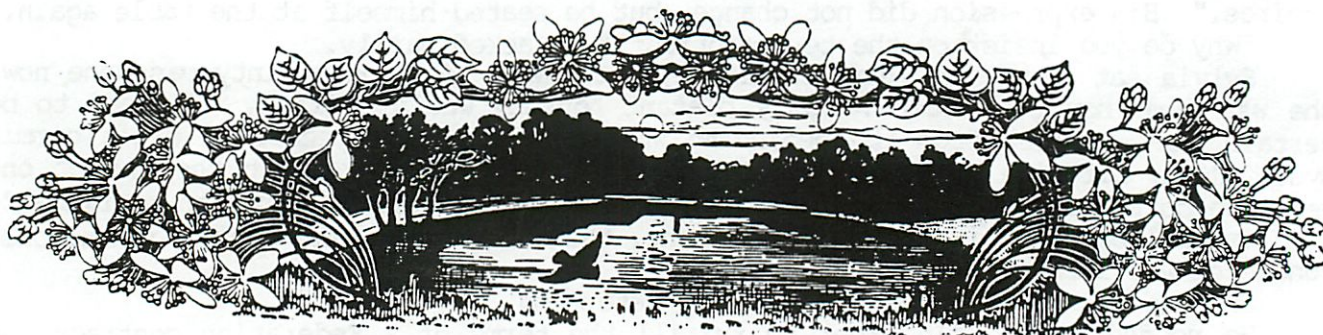
He paused, looked off-screen. "A representative from your company is waiting for you at Starbase 10, to retrieve the information you are carrying. Hardesty will be turned over to Federation authorities there."

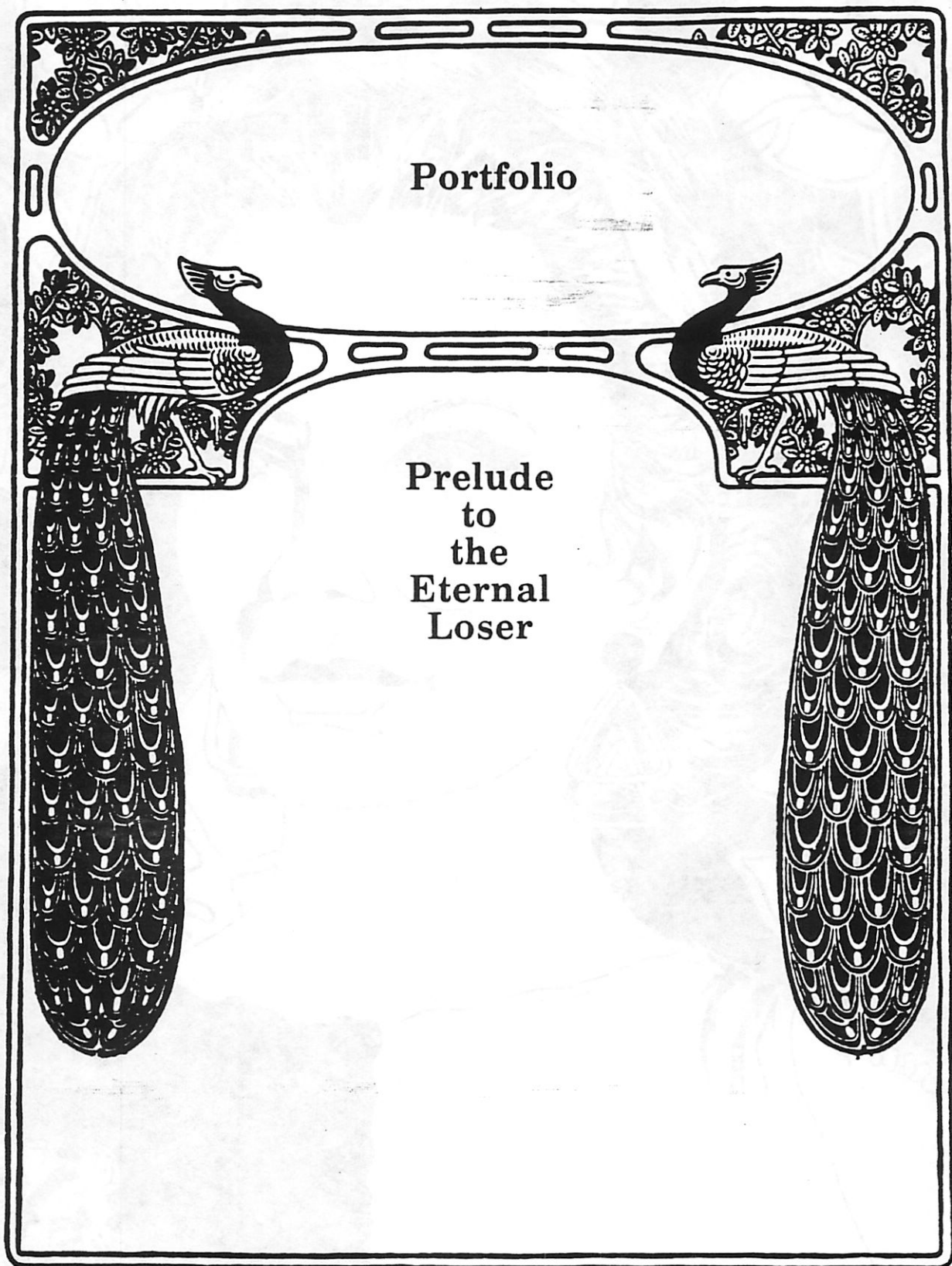
"Thank you, Commander Spock," she said, and switched off the device after she was sure that he had nothing more to say. She turned back to Seral and put her hands on his arms. "Now — back to business."

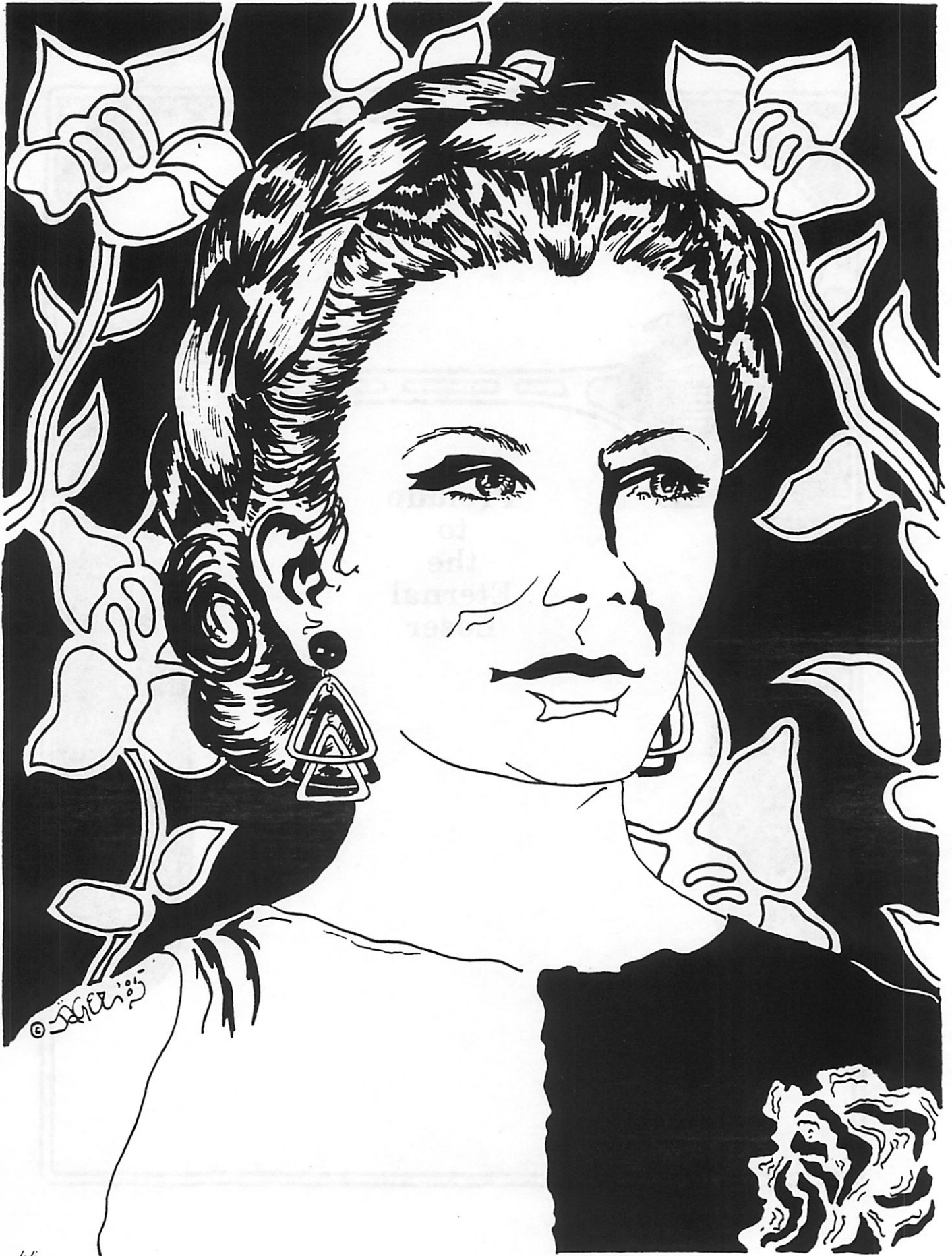
"I thought that we had finished the discussion," the Vulcan replied, just before he pulled her firmly against him.

"You know," she murmured against his lips, "Vulcans have only one fault. They talk too much."

His only response was the verbal order necessary to lock the door and dim the lights.



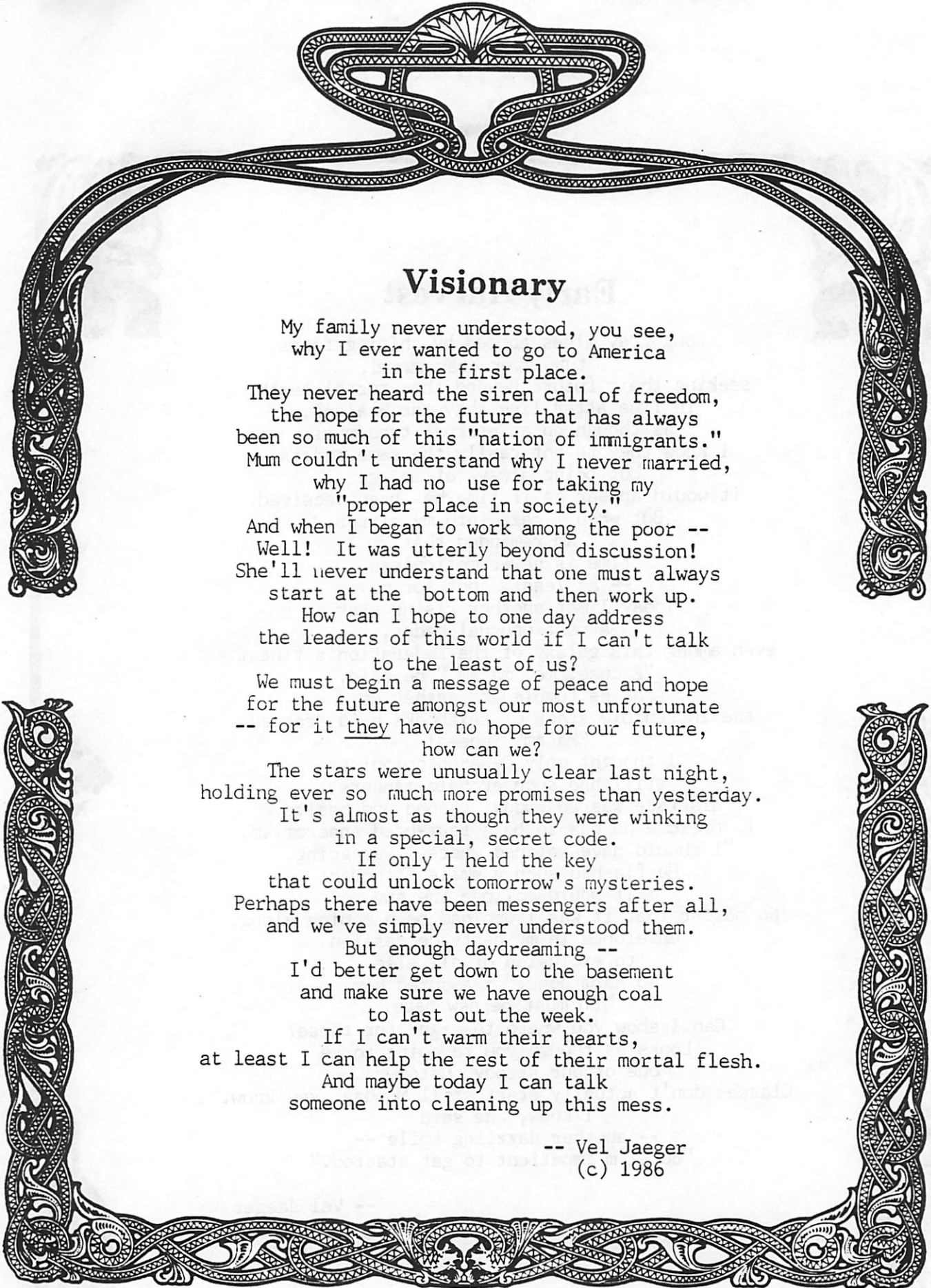




Early Harvest

Long grey lines topped by shining faces
turn ever heavenward,
seeking their future beyond this mortal earth.
In line after line they march along,
as though on an eternal treadmill.
I know they're not really the same cadets,
but being always of an age
it would appear as if time has been deceived.
But when I gaze into my mirror,
I am reminded that
time is never motionless
-- at least, not for me.
Today I met another rising star,
a most unusual cadet,
even among this galaxy of the Federation's finest.
"Excuse, me, ma'am," he said,
as he fumbled to gather up
the incredible stack of textbooks he'd dropped.
"Ma'am" indeed!
I thought only Debaran colonists
still had such archaic manners.
His face was so ruddy, tanned and healthy
I presume he has to be a farm-bred anacromism.
"I should have watched where I was going."
He flashed such a smile I thought
it would eclipse the sun.
No matter that it was I who had been moping along,
enveloped in my petty depression
to exclusion of all else.
"No harm done," I assured him.
"You must be new here..
Can I show you where to sign for those?
Looks as though you're going to be
one of our steady customers.
Classes don't actually start 'till Monday, you know."
"I know," he said
-- another dazzling smile --
"But I'm impatient to get started."

-- Vel Jaeger
(c) 1986



Visionary

My family never understood, you see,
why I ever wanted to go to America
in the first place.

They never heard the siren call of freedom,
the hope for the future that has always
been so much of this "nation of immigrants."
Mum couldn't understand why I never married,
why I had no use for taking my
"proper place in society."

And when I began to work among the poor --
Well! It was utterly beyond discussion!
She'll never understand that one must always
start at the bottom and then work up.

How can I hope to one day address
the leaders of this world if I can't talk
to the least of us?

We must begin a message of peace and hope
for the future amongst our most unfortunate
-- for it they have no hope for our future,
how can we?

The stars were unusually clear last night,
holding ever so much more promises than yesterday.

It's almost as though they were winking
in a special, secret code.

If only I held the key
that could unlock tomorrow's mysteries.
Perhaps there have been messengers after all,
and we've simply never understood them.

But enough daydreaming --
I'd better get down to the basement
and make sure we have enough coal
to last out the week.

If I can't warm their hearts,
at least I can help the rest of their mortal flesh.
And maybe today I can talk
someone into cleaning up this mess.

-- Vel Jaeger
(c) 1986





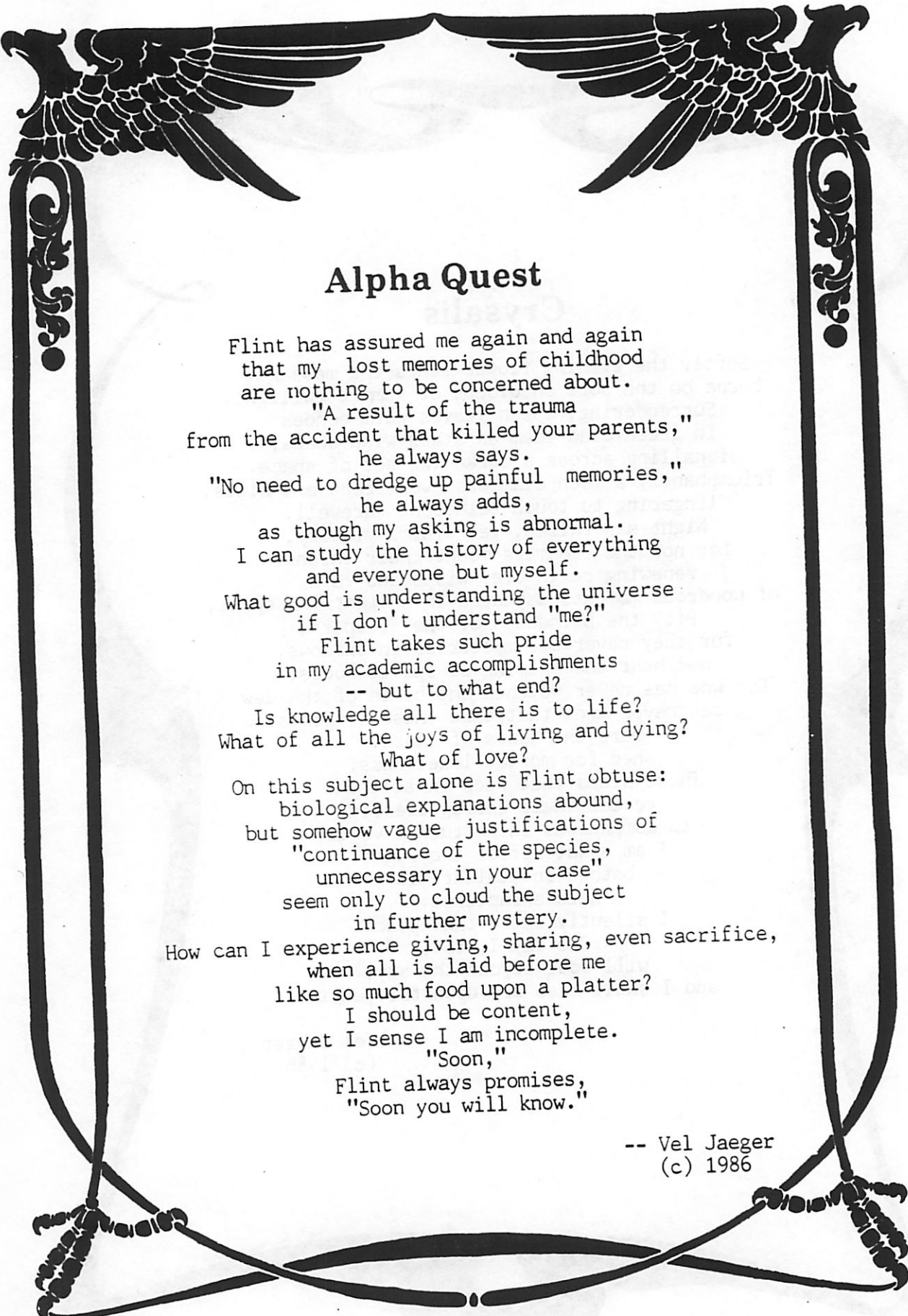
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R. G. G. G.



Crysalis

Softly the evening flower sends the message,
borne on the soft shoulders of summer twilight.
Surrendering, a sun leaves warm echoes
in green-clad loam as stars wink awake,
signalling across a darkening net of space.
Triumphantly a moon clambers over trees and hills,
lingering to touch reluctant farewell.
Night has fallen, yet claims victory,
for now the Dreamers mount their throne,
renewing reign over wisps and rays
of wondrous moments captured in a Nightling spell,
Pity the blindness of the Sleepers,
for they never see mysteries in shadows,
nor hear the chiming of spirit songs.
For who has never watched the birth of the dew
can never know that once these droplets
were the tears of stars,
shed for mortal loneliness.
Those stars that weep in solitude
reveal their sorrow clearly
to companions in nocturnal vigil.
I am a watcher of the night,
bathed in stellar mist,
held enraptured.
I silently share that peace.
One day I, too,
will soar beyond the sky,
and I shall also cry upon this earth.

-- Vel Jaeger
(c) 1986



Alpha Quest

Flint has assured me again and again
that my lost memories of childhood
are nothing to be concerned about.

"A result of the trauma
from the accident that killed your parents,"
he always says.

"No need to dredge up painful memories,"
he always adds,

as though my asking is abnormal.

I can study the history of everything
and everyone but myself.

What good is understanding the universe
if I don't understand "me?"

Flint takes such pride
in my academic accomplishments
-- but to what end?

Is knowledge all there is to life?
What of all the joys of living and dying?
What of love?

On this subject alone is Flint obtuse:
biological explanations abound,
but somehow vague justifications of
"continuance of the species,
unnecessary in your case"
seem only to cloud the subject
in further mystery.

How can I experience giving, sharing, even sacrifice,
when all is laid before me
like so much food upon a platter?

I should be content,
yet I sense I am incomplete.

"Soon,"

Flint always promises,
"Soon you will know."

-- Vel Jaeger
(c) 1986



Technically Speaking

by

Peter Scott

Hi! This first column will be pretty chaotic, since a lot of my notes and Trek stuff are either still in transit, or not yet rescued from the melange after my immigration from England. This Trekker is shortly starting work at NASA's Jet Propulsion Lab, programming navigation manoevers for the Galileo Jupiter probe, among others, and looking forward to it most eagerly.

It will take a while for a pattern to emerge from this column, but I hope to introduce more detailed discussions of the ramifications of some of the technology, characters and ideals of STAR TREK. How does the transporter send through solid objects? How can Vulcans be accepted and feel comfortable in human society outside of Starfleet duty? How does the Federation reconcile military organization with scientific and diplomatic purpose?

This time, however, I just have a few thoughts on TWOK.

NARROW MINDED. If Khan exhibited "two-dimensional thinking," so did Kirk in his final attack upon the Reliant. What exactly was to be gained from ducking underneath the Reliant, only to return to the same level? Surely there was little surprise value in approaching the Reliant from behind, since Kirk had already executed such a manoever without resorting to a third dimension. Were the Reliant's rear view screens knocked out? If not, why wasn't someone watching them, especially after they'd been rear-ended once? ((In fact, since the electrical discharges in the nebula disabled so many systems, why were the video scanners working so well? Why didn't Kirk have people stationed at the portholes in the ship (above the impulse engines looking rear — ST:TMP; observation deck seen in Conscience of the King — anyone remember where it was and what direction it looked in?) to relay their own better views to the bridge? Maybe the windows had to be covered with armored shutters.)) So why didn't Kirk position himself underneath the Reliant, pointing 'upwards' and shoot it in the belly as it went past? He would still have had the same bead on the warp engines — were there any other important systems he couldn't have shot from there? Perhaps that manoever sounds too much like dirty

fighting, but is it any less fair than shooting in the back without warning, which they did? (I don't consider it dirty fighting, but others might.)

STREAKING AWAY. One of the most spectacular effects introduced by the movies has been the warp speed effect. You've probably resigned yourself to thinking that this was another example of artistic license — like the whooshing sound as the ship goes by in a vacuum — but take heart. Hope is at hand in the guise of Cherenkov Radiation, a glow produced by a particle of non-zero mass when it moves faster than the speed of light in the local medium. (The speed of light changes according to the material it is moving in. In glass it is slowed by 30% to 50%, hence the refractive bending of light by lenses. The c of Einstein's formula is the speed of light in a vacuum.) But interstellar space is not a perfect vacuum. There are many molecules scattered within it. These must, however, slightly, lower the speed of light from its theoretical maximum, and therefore, just before the Enterprise reaches c (at which point it will have to enter some new dimension or undergo some transformation to avoid conflict with current physical laws), it will give off Cherenkov radiation along its path. The radiation will be multi-colored, since — if I interpret the Theory of Relativity correctly — as the Enterprise accelerates near the speed of light, different parts of the ship will be moving at different speeds and hence give off radiations of differing energy levels, which correspond to the frequencies — or colors — of the light emitted, according to the deBroglie equation. If someone has the formulae to calculate how fast the Enterprise has to go in free space of a density of about 0.5 H₂ molecules per CM³ in order to produce Cherenkov Radiation in the visible wavelength, send them in! (Let me say that I don't expect anything more than a millionth of a percent removed from c. However, that need not invalidate the theory one bit.)

#

TIED DOWN: Yet again the budget limitations of the series provided us with food for thought: not having the same budget as Kubrick did for 2001, the producers of Star Trek did not have the Enterprise's crew float through the corridors of the ship, turning zero-G cartwheels on their way. They had to keep their feet firmly planted on the deck. (In all deference, if no one-else did, Gene Roddenberry certainly wanted it that way, to make the environment of the ship more hospitable; however, even if he had wanted it the other way, it couldn't have been done — fortunately for us — since the NBC brass would certainly have loved weightlessness.)

Wait a minute, though. A minor miracle is being sneaked past us, untrumpeted. Anti-gravity units ("The Changeling", "Obsession", etc.) and anti-gravity chambers ("Space Seed", "The Lights of Zetar") are conspicuous in an environment where they provide what ought to be an oasis of normality in a sea of physical impossibility. Just how come everyone on the Enterprise is privileged to be anchored to the floor with the familiar Earth gravity?

Well, let's look at the obvious cause first. The Enterprise is a fairly heavy girl; The Making of Star Trek quotes her mass (p. 171) as 190,000 tons, and her overall length as 947 feet. Maybe all by herself her gravitational attraction for her crew is sufficient to hold them down. Well, let's see. Given the most optimistic value for distance in the gravitational equation

$$\text{Force} + G \cdot \frac{\text{mass}_1 \text{mass}_2}{(\text{distance})^2}$$

we find that a man will weigh approximately one 7,000,000th of his Earth weight on the deck of the Enterprise. (And the nearer he approaches to her center of mass, the less still will he weigh.)

Maybe they cheat. Maybe they wear magnetic boots and everything in the ship has a magnetic sticker on it to hold it down. But then they'd need extra-strong

hair spray to keep their hair from frizzing out, and as for drinks...well, does anyone know how much of a magnetic compound has to be dissolved in one before it can be attracted against its own weight? And are there any such tasteless, non-toxic magnetic compounds? Something tells me we're barking up the wrong tree.

So we're back to a miracle again. Nothing new in that; the warp drive is a miracle, the transporter is a miracle (we'll cover those in later columns); maybe they're connected by some underlying principle? (People prefer to minimize the number of miracles they're asked to believe in.)

Ever stopped to wonder why no-one on the Enterprise suffers from whiplash every time Kirk highballs her out of a tight spot? After all, if I floor the gas pedal at a stop light my V-8 sees to it that I get pushed into the seat; does this mean that the Enterprise accelerates slower than my Ford? A quick calculation shows that if you were on board a spaceship that was accelerating at one Earth gravity (so you had the creature comforts of home thrown into the bargain), to reach the speed of light from a standstill would take about one year. This immediately dismisses both the question above, and another hope you might have been nursing, that artificial gravity was maintained by ensuring that the Enterprise was always accelerating at one gravity and turned around when it had to slow down (stop and think for a moment what direction she would have to point in to do this and ask yourself whether it would look good on film).

So now we gotta 'nother miracle to handle! To put it succinctly, the Enterprise is capable of creating and destroying inertia as well as gravitation. Maybe that struck a chord with some of you. Especially any who have read the preamble you have to go through to understand the laws of Relativity. For the rest of you, essentially, inertia and gravitation are the same thing. You can't tell the difference out there! So the same device that maintains the ship's gravity is quite capable of nullifying the effects of sharp turns. (By the way, I'm not even going to consider the old tried-and-true method of spinning the ship to obtain gravity. She ain't the right shape. And think what that would look like on film!) Whatever the device is, it is highly protected, as we seldom see it affected (the Concordance tells us of an animated episode where the computer controlling the ship's gravity was affected, but I tend not to give much weight to those episodes anyway). Perhaps it's not so much a device as a state; perhaps the Enterprise functions in some corner of the space-time continuum where that is the normal way of things (but remember we have to explain its operation at sub-light speeds as well). And the anti-gravity gadgets are the same thing, with a slight adjustment (note they can't simply nullify the effect of the artificial gravity generator, since the actual inertia/gravity in space at that time might not be zero-G).

If you were hoping at this point that I would come up with some revelation as to the nature of this device, tough luck; I haven't a clue. But if you feel cheated maybe you at least had a good time reading the meandering discussion about it for its own sake.

#

In Star Trek we have seen much of the role of Vulcans in Starfleet circles, but little, if anything, of their interaction with humans outside the service. How would they far in ordinary, peace time human society? Can you imagine Vulcans in the supermarket? Cans of plomeek soup in the imports section? Vulcan singles bars? Vulcans sunbathing on the beach? Vulcan cable channels? Vulcan football?

Leaving aside the physical environment factors — Vulcans like it hot, red, and dry — what else makes it impossible to visualize the above suggestions seriously? Are Vulcans just too stuffy for us?

An important factor to remember is that in Star Trek we saw only the cream of any of the races represented on the Enterprise — with a few notorious exceptions, Harcourt — and naturally the Vulcans we encounter were of superior intelligence and ability among even their own kind. Just as Kirk et al were born to travel the star lanes, so the Vulcans we met were equally destined not to remain among the common people. What of the unremarkable Vulcan populace? How would they react to humans?

We can expect the un-cosmopolitan Vulcans to be less reasonable toward humans — just look at how touchy the Vulcans we saw were around humans who were broad-minded among their race. Since Vulcans will be on the average more intelligent and responsible than humans, the possibility for immense feuding based on intellectual arguments exists. We have all met at some time those people who will defend to the death a viewpoint they have created, even after they have seen it is invalid. Given the extraordinary pride exhibited by Vulcans, they are not likely to back down in an argument merely to ensure good relations.

So much for the difficulties experienced by humans among Vulcans. What of the other side of the coin? In looking at the problems for Vulcans in human society it is worth examining what it is about Starfleet society that makes it bearable for Vulcans inside it.

It has often been pointed out how military in structure Starfleet is. The rules and regulations imposed on its members are necessitated by dangerous circumstances that exist as possibilities for all lifeforms that are out of their natural habitat in space. Let's take a look at how these rules actually assist the Vulcan in Starfleet.

In an environment such as that on board a starship the enforced contact between beings creates the possibility for far more intense interactions between humans and Vulcans than would be seen in civilian society. We would expect to see any problems there that could possibly crop up. How did Vulcans make it work for them?

Vulcans have a strong sense of purpose, of working towards goals in life. Starfleet fulfills this sense of purpose admirably for those that can hack the requirements, and goes on to provide a framework of regulations that enshrine the purpose ("To seek out new life-forms...etc. in the case of the Enterprise) and give the Vulcan the ultimate excuse for fending off criticism; if it's not proscribed by regulations, then you have no business tell me you don't like my attitude. Sir.

Furthermore, the implicit rules by which we all relate to each other in specific circumstances that are governed by uniquely human weaknesses of perception are too involved and incomprehensible to Vulcans for them to keep them among human company to an extent that would be acceptable to the majority of humans not making allowances for the Vulcan background. Loosely translated, this means that Vulcans will always seem to be making social gaffes in human society. Fortunately for the Vulcans in Starfleet, the regulations by which they live cover — or can be extended to cover — the ways in which they interact with their fellow crew-members to such an extent that they don't have to expend inordinate effort in ensuring that they are fitting in correctly. And they always have the appeal to the higher authority, the purpose of their mission, to fall back on when things get sticky. All this is not meant to imply that Vulcans in Starfleet are a conniving, self-serving bunch; far from it. But they are at the effect of the rules they place on relationships just as we are at ours, and they will handle situations in appropriate ways. Given the apparent knife-edge on which Vulcan-human interaction works in Starfleet, I suggest that intermixing the populaces of Vulcan and Earth could be a recipe only for fireworks.

#

Next to the Warp drive, perhaps one of the most exciting inventions of the 23rd century is the transporter. Here is a prime example of a device originally introduced in order to cut time and effects budgets in the show that turned out to be one of the most fascinating details of the series. It was discovered early on that film scenes of the Enterprise landing on a planet would not only consume too many special effects for the budget, it would also take too much irrelevant screen time. Fortunately for those of us who love the Enterprise the shape she is, the transporter was devised and there was no need to design a starship with a squat base.

The technical objections one can raise to the idea of the transporter are almost as numerous as the questions it provokes. What is the medium of

transmission? If, like me, you prefer to believe in the most esoteric bases possible for the science of Star Trek, you will be disappointed to learn that the original concept was a beam of light (which was seen at some point according to pilot scripts, although I don't know if it was actually filmed) which would only travel across "relatively short, line of sight distances". Well, line of sight was killed as soon as anyone beamed into a room (ever wondered why Kirk and his yeoman beamed down outdoors to the starbase in "Menagerie"? Here's an answer), and that immediately kills any kind of visible electromagnetic radiation.

This immediately brings up a whole host of questions. It's true that light could be used if there was a receiving station mounted within line of sight that could transmit the signal to the room the transporters were beaming to, as indeed the signal must be sent from the transporter room to a transmitter on the outside of the Enterprise. But that leaves no possibility of beaming into an area where there is no receiving platform. There are also some slight considerations about using light for transmission — that portion of the electromagnetic spectrum is fairly susceptible to dense mediums, i.e., it gets stopped easily. Imagine the consequences of a bird flying through the beam and inadvertently preventing your spleen from making it across. Or a fog bank rolls in and you end up half-size. Or the beam passes through a cloud that reflects it internally and you end up laterally inverted. This just won't do....

How about another portion of the electromagnetic spectrum? Without going into the whys and wherefores of the physics involved, one wants to move towards longer rather than shorter wavelengths, i.e., into the radio frequencies. We all know that radio waves exhibit the properties that we associate with the transporter beam, i.e., it attenuates with distance but is relatively unperturbed by intervening matter, and is stopped by solid rock fairly effectively. Here's a possible answer. I'm real sorry I have to torpedo it. I'm afraid that radio waves just don't have the intelligence to transform matter at some point along the beam, at least, not according to any current theory. If the transporter only transmitted to an intelligent receiving station, then we need look no further than radio waves, however, it also seems to be able to transport people where no machine has gone before. Something peculiar is going on with the beam at the place where the transporter materializes.

Just where does the matter go anyway? It's stretching the imagination a little too far to speculate that the law of conservation of mass/energy will have been repealed in the 23rd century, so what happens to the matter of the transportee? The most likely theory is that it is converted into energy itself, which is beamed as some kind of wave. I don't have the necessary formulae to hand, but to convert any particle into energy requires an input of energy itself in order to surmount a potential energy hump. This energy increases with the atomic mass of the element of the particle, reaching a maximum for iron, I believe — someone correct me if I'm wrong. The energy input to transmit a person would be considerable. Well, the original spec did say that the transporter was a major drain on the ship's resources.

Come to that, does the transporter beam instantaneously (which definitely rules out electromagnetic radiation as the carrier)? If not, then we have an interesting, if expensive means of suspending animation — just set up an infinite loop. And even if the beam is transmitted instantaneously, there seems to be a period of freezing at the time of transmission and also of reception.

There's almost no end to the questions that the transporter raises that I haven't even touched on. Why isn't there a clap of collapsing air when someone is transported? What pushes the air out of the way when they arrive (after all, air is matter just like rock, just less dense, that's all)? Do we pay any attention to the animated episode that decided that the information necessary to reconstruct transportees was held in a transporter computer, which would mean that not only do we have a perfect suspended animation, but also a means of replicating people ad nauseam?

Comments invited....

* * * * *

WARPING OUT

In this column we engage in explaining the implausible, hypothesizing the unworkable, dissecting the inconstructible. This time we delve into the impossible.

Not many people on the planet over the age of three are, by now, unaware of one of the implications of Einstein's Theory of Special Relativity, usually reduced to the popular phrase, "Nothing can travel faster than light." Actually the restricting is on information, which includes matter (if you don't think matter is information, take a look at a DNA molecule some time). And since Einstein (pesky fellow, isn't he?) also demonstrated that matter and energy are equivalent, we can eliminate all forms of energy from the trans-light sweepstakes as well. Information, matter, energy. Sure looks like "everything", doesn't it? Why bother to go any further...?

Which is what an awful lot of people with the brains and talent to do so have unfortunately said. Those who have dared to delve into the impossible have uncovered enough possibilities to make your hair stand on end. There are certain kinds of waves (someone who knows how this works and ties in with waveguides, please let me know) which can theoretically travel faster than light. Without conveying any information, of course. There is a class of particle called tachyons (meaning the opposite of "tardyons", or "slow particles," the stuff of which you and I are made) which never travel slower than light. (They actually have to work up more steam to travel slower. Rather like small children.) These have been hypothesized for some time, and a big hunt is now underway for evidence of their existence also predicted by the theories.

There is a back door approach. What we actually want to do is get to a far-off place in a relatively short time. This may on the face of it require travelling faster than light — after all, speed equals distance over time, no? However, one can attack the "time" end of it, either by building a time machine (not many sensible theories for doing this, I'm afraid), or by remaining completely within the bounds of accepted and tested physics by simply travelling so close to the speed of light that the time dilation factor decreases the subjective time, i.e., that experienced by the traveller, to an acceptable degree. This factor is given by the formula

$$\gamma = \frac{1}{\sqrt{1 - v^2/c^2}}$$

where v is the velocity, and c is the speed of light (from the Latin celere, meaning velocity). This has the undesirable side-effect of putting the traveller way out of synch with the rest of the universe. Also, if one remains within the bounds of mainstream physics, the spacecraft would have to accelerate at a rate of no more than one Earth gravity in order to maintain comfort for its occupants, and thus would take about a year to near the speed of light whichever way you look at it. We need the inertia canceller postulated in an earlier column.

Or one can look at the distance aspect of the trip, and see if this can't be circumvented. This is the most popular propulsion principle of science-fiction spaceships, and is the method used by our very own Enterprise (wondered when I was going to get around to STAR TREK, didn't you?). Either the starship translates itself into a higher spatial dimension (you know about that stuff, right? Read Robert Heinlein's short story, "And He Built a Crooked House" if not) in which the journey is considerably shorter, or it relies upon the notion of curved space, by curving space a little more, with the help of vast amounts of energy, and then jumping across the fold. The Enterprise uses the matter-antimatter reaction to generate its energy for doing this. Can anyone tell me what role the dilithium crystals play in this?

Closer to the realm of orthodox physics, there are theories predicting faster-than-light travel (FTL) by approaching very closely to rotating or charged black holes (unfortunately, the spacecraft would be reduced to a stream of plasma in the process). Does someone have a reference for these theories? I have a reference of my own for the next part - a recent 'red issue' of the Journal of the British Interplanetary Society (which has very many members in Southern California; the same issue which carried a paper written by one of the scientists working in my group at JPL) contained a paper demonstrating, in mathematics beyond my comprehension but ostensibly kosher, that FTL need not violate the principle of causality, and calculated that the new theoretical maximum speed for a 100,000 ton starship would be $10^{19}c$, at which velocity it could travel to the edge of the universe and back in less than a millisecond.

Now, after having spent six times as much space on the possibilities of travelling faster than light than the reasons why it can't be done, I think I can step out on a limb and say that by the time the era of STAR TREK arrives, the technology to realize it will have been created. There are always ...possibilities....

#

For many of us, the magical quality of STAR TREK stems from its machines and its technology; for many others, from the optimistic vision of the future and its diversity. Another element that touches many of us concerns the relationship between the principal characters. What is it about Kirk, Spock and McCoy that we admire so much? The emergence in the past thirteen years of formal terms for analyzing human motivations and yearnings now permits us to find the key to their success as a team: unity without compromise; respect without pandering; love without the maudlin.

I make the following distinction between an acquaintance and the rarer "friend": an acquaintance is someone whom the more I get to know them, the more I dislike them. "Familiarity breeds contempt" was spawned by this common syndrome. A friend is someone I like the more, the more I get to know, without exception. There can be no reservations. There comes a point in the development of a relationship with a friend where the mutual distrust that characterizes all beginnings (generated by a fear of being hurt) starts to set aside, as trust builds. This in turn permits more communication and therefore more exchange of personalities; which in turn reveals more evidence that there is nothing ahead to fear, and so it cascades.

At this point, most people are comfortable with their friendships, and sustained by them for however long they last. Their growth beyond this stage, however, is limited without a vehicle. Outside armed combat, there is little in our present society to provide a powerful vehicle for close friendships.

Enter Starfleet. With the perfect vehicle for relationships to develop in: the ultimate in adventurous aims, risk at least equal to full-scale war, and an objective so unassailable in its morality that no one need ever have the space of their relationships crowded by concerns about the ethics of their purpose.

The job of Captain is deliberately played up in the series until it attains superhuman status, and rightly so. With the shrinking of the world since the advent of telecommunications, we can no longer remember the isolation of ocean voyages with the need for authority to devolve on one man as figurehead for his crew. Yet no man is an island, so it is said, and in space no captain could survive without healthy support. The loners would be weeded out by Starfleet's sophisticated psychological testing; the Blighs would be revolving in undergraduate circles around the academy. The regulations aboard a starship are superb in their support of the well-being of the captain's temperament; although he retains absolute authority — something we have degraded too much in our current society from those who need it, like judges and diplomats who, in turn have lived down to our expectations of their depleted morality — the regulations not only permit, but insist upon, constant feedback from his second-in-command and physician who express their opinions freely and fully. Kowtowing is a sign of decadence and is thankfully absent from starships.

The relationships that we see in the triangle at the top of the Enterprise are those that we would love so delay to have in our own lives; so much more expertly portrayed by Shatner, Nimoy and Kelley than I think any of the actors from the first pilot could have done. The captain has to combine strength greater than any other man aboard with humility to recognize and immediately admit to any mistake — any ego-borne hesitation can cost lives — and the openness, the willingness to abandon privacy of any part of his being, in order to let in the support of his command team. The first officer has to recognize the authority of the captain and obey him to all times, even when ordered to do something which he has expressed disagreement with, and must only not waste time defending his view when the command decision is made, not only carry out the order with as much alacrity as possible (not giving a half-effort so that failure could "prove" him right in the first place), but also not allow the disagreement of his captain to prevent him from expressing his opinion in the future. The doctor has to safeguard the mental health of the captain at all times; he alone has the power to overrule him within regulations if the captain is mentally ill, and so the captain is left in no doubt whatsoever that there is no possibility of the doctor scheming against him or undermining his command with a psychological "cold war".

Paramount among the requisites for the success of these relationships are the ability to "get off it" and "completion". In any relationship there will be conflicts; in a truly alive relationships these conflicts will likely be violent when they occur, as each party expresses themselves fully. (They can not express themselves fully if they (a) desire the relationship to continue, and (b) are unsure enough of the other's commitment to the relationship that they think they might break it off if annoyed in a confrontation.) In any argument there exists the possibility that no agreement will be reached. The success of the relationship depends on each party being willing to let the other person be right, whether or not they agree. Too many times we prolong arguments by trying to eke out of the other person some magic rationale we are sure they possess, the hearing of which we just know will convince us that they are right, and the disagreement will be over.

Completion of any episode in a relationship means that it is over. There are no feelings left unexpressed that should be expressed, no communications left undelivered, no questions left unasked. At this stage, any episode can only contribute to the lives of those involved. When Spock saves Kirk's life, Kirk thanks him; if he didn't do so, the fact that he'd forgotten would weigh on his mind like the item you know you were going to put on the shopping list but can't remember until you're past the checkout stand. When Spock and McCoy have a heated confrontation (c.f. THE THOLIAN WEB), each apologizes to the other at the end of it. Most importantly, neither of them cheats the other by anything resembling abasement; to pretend abjection as though one had been utterly defeated in battle and had had one's spirit broken by the other is a way of hiding the fact that you are not truly acknowledging the other for what you did wrong and what they did right. Each episode ends with this kind of completion, the kind which allows each of them to go on to more and greater things, the kind which you and I experience much more seldomly than once a week.

#

We often under-estimate the power of a simple request. In less well-ordered environments than Starfleet the price of lack of clarity is seldom demanding. If we ask someone to do something and don't specify a deadline, the fact that it doesn't get done in time just seems one of life's inevitable hardships. If we don't specify our exact terms of satisfaction, the fact that we asked for "a burger," and got a hamburger when we wanted a cheeseburger just seems another example of how people misunderstand us. Few of us work in environments where the penalty for imprecision is incentive enough to be accurate the first time, every time. Surgeons are one example: when a life is at stake they will rarely leave matters to chance. But for most of the rest of us, even though we have to pay for our laziness, the causal connection is generally obscure enough that we can comfortably ignore it.

However, when the lives of over four hundred people and possibly the fate of the galaxy rest on the decisions of one man, that man must make full use of his available support. This means clear, unencumbered communication. Despite the fact that the Star Trek episodes were written by authors who presumably had little experience in situations of equal peril, they conveyed the techniques of precise communication most accurately. Take for example the ways in which Kirk uses Spock, by "speaking into his listening," i.e., taking into account the way in which Spock interprets what he hears and using that information to shape his own requests and orders to have Spock accomplish what he has in mind. A request for additional information, for instance, can take many forms, such as:

"Opinion, Spock"
or "Evaluation, Spock"
or "Suggestion, Spock"
or "Analysis, Spock"
or "Hypothesis, Spock"
or "Recommendation, Spock"
or "Speculation, Spock"
or "Conclusion, Spock"

Each of these requests is precisely appropriate for a particular situation. When Kirk wants an opinion, he's seeking Spock's personal "educated guess," without demanding evidence or reasoning. Useful for obtaining less rigidly-constrained possibilities than, say, a recommendation would provide. An evaluation calls for a manipulation of raw data to provide a more insightful interpretation of a situation. A request for a suggestion invites Spock to recommend a course of action without prejudice. An analysis is a processing of data into information that was not apparent before; it requires collapsing all available information into a single, useful description. If Kirk asks for a hypothesis, he is again getting an opinion from Spock, but this time, one that would require some rationalization. A recommendation is a suggestion that requires Spock to stake rather more professional reputation. When Kirk wants Spock to abandon fruitless analysis and come up with whatever he can manage in the way of intuition, he asks for a speculation. When he needs a useful summary of a mass of data and analyses he requests a conclusion.

Now, imagine the likely result if the request were a laconic, "Well, Spock, what do you think?" (How many times do we say that?!) Can you come up with any other forms of requests for information that Kirk makes of Spock? (It is interesting to note that Spock frequently volunteers probability analyses, although Kirk almost never asks what the odds are!) Now observe the way Kirk interacts with McCoy; totally different: again, tailored for the individual that the doctor is. whereas the request, "Spock, what am I going to do?" would like elicit the response, "Captain, I estimate an eighty-seven percent probability that you will...", the plea, "Bones, what am I going to do?" will produce the desired assistance.

#

I'll take this brief space to mention money. What kind of currency would the Federation use? Money was originally introduced when the barter system broke down because A wanted something of B's, but didn't have anything considered of equivalent worth that B wanted, although he had plenty that, say, C would gladly trade for, so the concept of "fair market value" came into existence, and A would give B a token for the value of what he wanted of B's, which B could then use to buy goods belonging to the D that he had been coveting. The token had to be as difficult as possible to forge, hence precious metals, and later engraved coins were used. Then the money demand outgrew the supply of precious metals (or at least, made it uneconomic to continue making exclusively coins), and so, since by now the government was making all the coins, they issued paper notes (far cheaper to make) which were promissory notes for an equivalent amount of gold held in a national deposit (or so the peasantry was led to believe).

By this time the meaning of money was quite obfuscated, and it became difficult to explain to people why, for instance, they couldn't just print up as many notes as they wanted. Another problem was that of parallel development: most of the nations on Earth evolved quite independent currency systems, until we got into the mess we are in today, whereby the relative worths of items in two different countries can fluctuate in a way that makes entrepreneurs richer and others poorer.

Keeping the currency flow on Earth working is a tough enough job as it is; making it run across light years and attendant communication delays boggles the fiscal mind. Today the real meaning of money is rapidly losing all reality as electronic transfers abound; in two hundred years the only remaining coins and notes are likely to be in museums. With the prospect of immense delays between transaction and posting, not to mention authorization, the barter system is likely to find increasing favor, the most popular items being those essential to survival and travel. The only possible solution to the communications delay would be for each individual to be their own bank, carrying around with them something like a credit card which contained their current balance in encoded form. The chances of these being tampered with are too great, however, and it would be rather difficult to open an IRA with one. The thought of how a galaxy-wide corporation could do business fries the brain cells.

#

Star Trek provides many speculations on the technology of the future, mostly a barometer of the projections prevalent in the imaginations of science-fiction writers in the late sixties. Since then, the actual developments in technology have proceeded along lines which no one predicted, and so we have seen, for instance, devices such as jet hypodermics, hand communicators, and micro-cassettes come about already. Others such as hand lasers and tricorders (does anyone know why they are called "tricorders"?) are not too far off, once the military advances far enough beyond them to declassify the necessary material. On the other hand, devices once thought to be no more difficult are receding into the mists of uncertainty between the feasible and the improbable; for instance, the universal translator.

Probably the most disparate advances have come about in the field of computers, however. When Star Trek was made, the best computers of the era were giant transistorized units (when Scotty calls transistors "archaic" in SPACE SEED, little did anyone realize that they would actually become archaic in half a generation) which took up a room to do the work which can now be done by an IBM PC/AT, whereas the user interface of Apple's Macintosh was barely conceivable. Integrated circuits were on the horizon, but VLSI (Very Large-Scale Integration) was unheard of. To imagine then, a computer which would run the ship was a feat of daring, especially since the computers of the time were very bad for real-time control uses. Even in the visionary epic of the same period, the HAL computer of 2001 was unrealistically large. The latest supercomputers have shrunk in size not only because of miniaturization, but out of sheer necessity; these computers still spend 25% of their time waiting for electrical signals to travel along wires. One of the most recent of these, the CRAY-XMP, is no larger than a family refrigerator. Now computers are being designed with optical switches and circuits, which will be limited by the speed of light, not electricity. And these will be shrunk further.

Paradoxically, we now know that the M-5 computer (THE ULTIMATE COMPUTER) would be a less sophisticated device than the regular ship's computer. The former was held to be superior because it could control the functions of a starship which would normally be performed by its crew, but this is in fact relatively easy, since most of those functions are easily enumerated as machine algorithms. A computer capable of performing these functions is less than five years away, although it will not be modelled on human engrams as M-5 was. Command judgment can be achieved using a knowledge base, also called an expert system: the technology of computer knowledge engineering has been in existence for several years now; a system capable of command decisions, based on heuristics and put through an extensive "training", is feasible

within the same time span. The ability of the M-5 to explain itself to Dr. Daystrom is not far-fetched; primitive systems which decide how to accomplish tasks and can then explain to an enquirer why they did so (converging to the answer, "Because you told me to") have been in existence for several years.

The most difficult tasks performed by the M-5 are those that it has in common with the Enterprise's own computer: speech recognition and understanding. Speech recognition is currently limited to reducing speech to its constituent phonemes (sound elements) and making educated guesses as to the likely words they were intended to form. The field is up against the barrier of human interpretation; even our simplest, base-formed, grammatically correct sentences are open to numerous interpretations by a machine that knows nothing about human values, idiosyncracies language, thought patterns, systems of belief, or patterns of interpretation. Far more of our understanding of speech is actually based on context than we previously suspected; yet it still retains enough redundancy that we can correctly interpret speech even when we cannot hear up to a third of it. Not only are computers nowhere near achieving the same proficiency, but—to this author at least—they will never approach it by the current research efforts. Almost all of these show the classical symptoms of the wrong technology being used to achieve something, rather as the Victorians invented gadgets of mind-boggling size and complexity to achieve certain tasks using steam power when electricity was far more appropriate. Any approach to speech understanding that tries to anticipate all situations and does not provide the computer with the capacity to learn beyond what the programmer anticipates is certain to fail. Only the very recent steps towards a biological architecture for computers, capable of learning from raw stimuli, stand a chance of success—and then in the same step, we will have computers that think, that are intelligent, that are conscious. This is not fantasy. The construction of human beings represents the ultimate in self-programming computers; one molecule of ROM provides all the initial instructions to start the system gathering data to teach itself how to learn to program itself. When this process has been modelled in electronic terms (the main difficulty will probably lie in persuading it to do what we want it to do; quite apart from that lies the problem of figuring out what it actually is doing), then—and only then—will we have a computer capable of performing as the Enterprise computer did (in WOLF IN THE FOLD) when Spock ordered it, "Analyze conversation in this room in the past five minutes and correlate hypotheses."

Kirk was right to sense a danger in the M-5 computer, although he never pinpointed it for us; it was not a premonition of the machine's flaws, but instead a sense of the threat it posed to our humanity. I do NOT mean the fragile yet giant egos that cannot handle the idea of a machine being able to do their job, but the aliveness we enjoy from living on the edge and risking our lives to challenge the unknown; a human race that stayed home contemplating its navel while machines explored the galaxy, having all the fun and occasionally getting blown up would be a race that rapidly stagnated and died. The biggest hazard that space expansion faces is from those who advocate unmanned exploration over manned purely on the basis of efficiency; even when a manned mission to Mars would be many times more expensive and less efficient than an unmanned mission, we cannot use that as justification for staying at home, and instead of "leaving the cradle", merely throwing our rattles on the floor and listening to how they bounce. The current pressures to make a space-station automated instead of manned are real and significant; if they win, it would set back the progress of manned exploration by a decade. This issue is being debated now; write your congressman if you care which way it is resolved.

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On May 30, Dr. Robert Forward delivered a lunchtime talk to JPL (Jet Propulsion Lab) employees (fortunately, this included consultants) titled, "The Feasibility of Interstellar Travel." I am going to try to obtain transcripts of and viewgraph copies of this talk, because it marked a milestone in my knowledge and outlook of this topic, and everyone who is concerned with our future in space should be aware

of its contents. I will therefore try to give you a brief outline of those contents. Where I am unsure of a figure I have quoted, I will put a query in parentheses following: (?)

In their efforts not to be scorned as unimaginative by a hind-sighted future society of space-farers, interstellar travel researchers have left no corner of physics unswept for ideas, no possible mode of travel unexamined. Proposals range from the unmanned probes to the giant O'Neill cylinders plowing through the dust lanes of the galaxy. Robert Forward — working for Hughes Aircraft and as a private consultant to the Air Force from his own company, "Forward Unlimited" — is one of the few men I have met that I consider a genius. In a realm dominated by wild ideas, with no clear demarcation between science fantasy, fiction, and fact, he has not only demonstrated the feasibility of his proposals by contemporary or near-future standards, but has also performed original thinking (Forward Thinking?) that would make deBono and Clarke equally proud.

Starting from the most grandiose of possibilities, Forward has proposals for space arks that include giant fusion plants, or Bussard ramjets collecting interstellar ions and fusing them in a p-p reaction for power — all very practical stuff, if on a large scale. But thinking Big is the Forward trademark.

When it comes to smaller, manned probes, Forward mounts his favorite hobby-horse of antimatter, upon which he is copiously informed. Anti-matter, we were informed, poses the single best method we can envisage for the exploration of the planets and stars. Now there are two quantities describing any mission which are critical to its make-up: the first is the delta-vee required, which is to say, the total amount of (scalar) velocity change that must be performed over the mission (this assumes that the velocity changes are not directed up or down the slopes of any gravitational wells, and it turns out that except for getting off Earth, the major energy costs are involved in just these velocity changes). The second is largely dictated by the first, and the mass ratio for the mission, which is the ratio of the total mass of the craft to the mass of the payload. One can see that the Apollo missions had huge mass ratios: of all that left the pad, all that counted were the command and (top half of the) lunar modules — and only the former returned to Earth. The Space Shuttle has a smaller mass ratio and is therefore more cost-effective. The mass ratio is dependent on the efficiency of the fuel, which is reckoned as the ratio of the energy liberated by the fuel in the reaction chamber to its equivalent (relativistic) rest energy.

Take a simple mission. You are on one Earth space station. In the same orbit, but travelling in the opposite direction, is another space station that you want to travel to (presumably to warn them to look out when your station starts to approach). And suppose you want to return. This mission was a delta-vee of 30 km/s. Now, for the common fuel of LOX/LH2 (liquid oxygen and hydrogen), the mass ratio for such a trip is 500. This is an impossible task. And it is now an unreasonable mission. It did not even require doing any work against the Earth's gravitational field, yet is more cost-effective to return to Earth first and lift off from there to the second space station than it is to stay in space. Not so with anti-matter. The mass ratio then becomes 3. In fact, it is possible to undertake any mission with antimatter and the mass ratio will never exceed 5. This is because it is the only fuel that has an efficiency of 200% (think about it). And on interstellar missions, reaction mass is free (collect it with the Bussard scoop).

Why aren't we doing this, you cry. Well, one of the good reasons is the chronic shortage of anti-matter. Anti-matter has been manufactured for several years now at CERN in Europe. Unfortunately, even given the resolution of their difficulties with storing the stuff, they have still only been making about 10 grams per day. Forward wants several Kg of the stuff for a mission. However, ignoring the vicissitudes of economics, he continues hypothesizing in the teeth of present-day realities. (When asked if he had, any any time, considered money as a factor, he instantly replied, "Oh, of course not." Not his job.) If it were not

for this spirit, we would not now have learned that the same spacecraft, fueled with anti-matter, can equally well travel to the Moon as to Alpha Centauri. Just add more anti-matter. And we all know how the Enterprise is powered....

Well, if we can't fuel an interstellar mission with anti-matter, what else can we use? Let's see how we can lighten our spaceship fuel systems (tanks, pipes, etc.), and structural dead weight. Well, Forward proposes, let's throw out fuel for a start. If we do that, we don't need any fuel systems. If we throw them out, we don't need any structure to couple the fuel systems to the payload. So how do we power it? Solar sails. With an infinite specific impulse, what more could you want? Well, it turns out that the acceleration — although continuous — isn't too hot, especially if you're the impatient type. Can we lighten the mass of the sail and reduce drag at the same time? Unbelievably, the answer is yes. Make the sail out of a hyperfine mesh whose holes are smaller than the wavelength of the mean incident energy, yet larger than interstellar atoms.

How about replacing the Sun? Use a microwave laser (maser — actually invented before the laser) on Earth to propel the craft. In order for the maser to be effective, the beam must converge no closer than half-way to the target star system. What aperture maser are we talking about? It turns out that this was a sticking-point for a few years, because Forward and others couldn't conceive of a maser with an aperture greater than a kilometer. Now he can. Friends, all this mission needs is a maser with an aperture of a mere ten thousand kilometers or so, and it will easily do the job. (In order to build the lens for this monster, there is speculation about coarse light-weight meshes for the surface and aerosols — fine mists, not hair sprays — for the refracting medium.) The good news is that the lens can tolerate distortions on the order of several meters without noticeable degradation in performance. The size of the solar sail on the spaceship is of the same order.

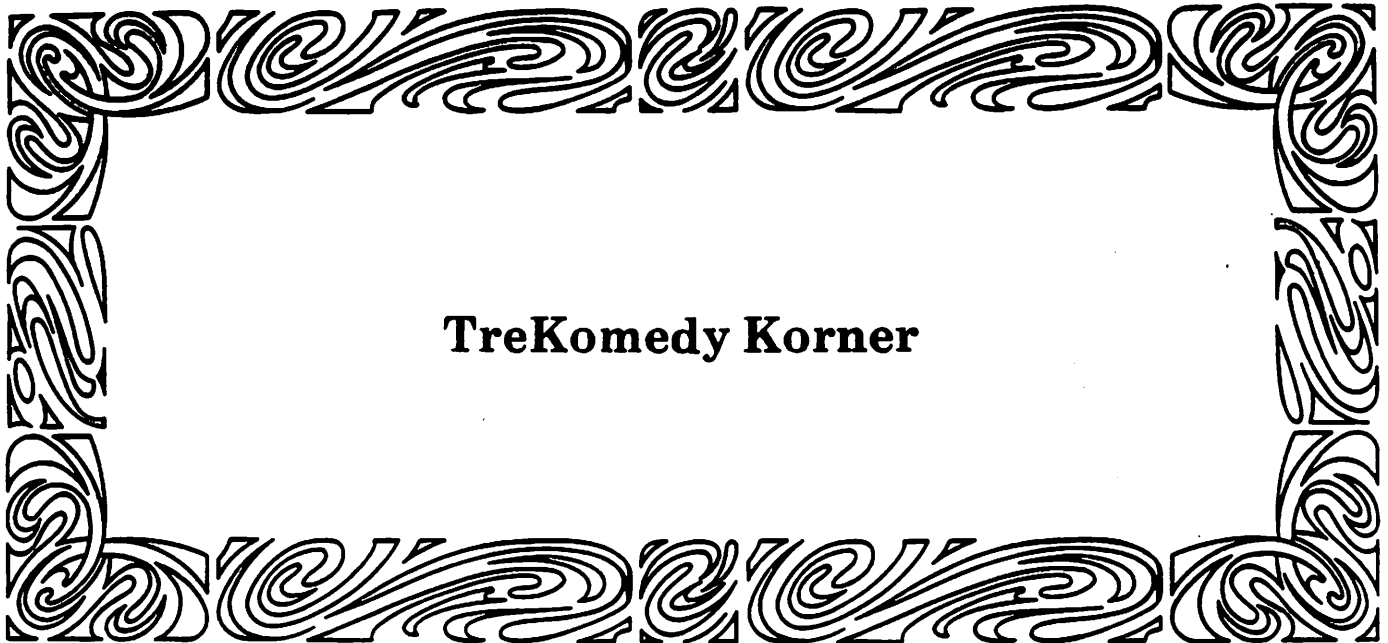
Assuming that you want a mission that accelerates to 20% of the speed of light, the energy output of the maser works out to be 1300 TW (that's Tera-Watts). To put this in perspective, the total amount of power generated on the Earth at the moment, from nuclear power stations down to the bonfires of the bushmen of the Kalahari, is less than 10 TW. Where on Earth could we build this juggernaut? What would we power it with?

Actually the best place is far away from Earth: Mercury. And the Sun makes an ideal power source. Using solar radiation to stimulate the maser, this device is theoretically possible.

For those of you who wonder how one decelerates a maser sail-powered mission, here's the trick: build one sail as a flat circle, and then add around its outside, an annulus of another sail, of area at least twice that of the inner circle. When deceleration is called for, detach the outer annulus, curving it so that it reflects the maser radiation back onto the other side of your payload-bearing sail, a la Cassegrain optics. I leave it to your imaginations how the same mission might return to Earth.

All this would be fine for a society with a GNP to match its projects, but what can we reach more easily? Forward has more ideas. Let's start with an unmanned mission. Unmanned probes are currently suffering from obesity. The Galileo mission, which I am working on, currently masses a few tons. Forward's idea for an interstellar probe masses about a kilogram. It consists of a fine mesh several kilometers across punctuated with 10^{11} (?) microcircuits. Each of these circuits consists of a CCD imaging pixel at the bottom of a deep well on the target system side of the sail, and a transceiver on the Earthside. Propulsion is by means of a large maser, but no more powerful than has been proposed under the Strategic Defense Initiative. The probe will reach approximately 50% (?) of the speed of light within a short period, and will reach Barnard's star within thirty years or so. As it approaches, each of the microcircuits sends signals to its neighbors to determine its own position on the mesh. It then encodes its CCD image and sends the image

back to Earth by modulating the reflected microwave beam, encoding the picture in an interference pattern. There is a similarity between this method of transmission and the operation of a phased-array radar that allows the beam to be steered if necessary. This project could actually be undertaken for a fraction of the estimated cost of SDI. Perhaps when the first battlefield masers go into orbit, someone will remember this use for them.



TreKomedY Korner

— From the Land of Quadrotriticale

By Elliot Miller & Louis Rakita

Well, if you really want to get technical, it's actually triticale ("It's root grain, triticale, can trace its ancestry all the way back to 20th Century Canada"; ref. TROUBLE WITH TRIBBLES) — but would "triticale" have caught your attention? Since this is the only Canadian **TREKISM** column we thought that would be an appropriate title. Hello, everybody!

To tell you a bit about ourselves: Louis Rakita, a Mensan since 1980, is 23, a theatre student at McGill University, and an aspiring actor and singer. He writes songs as well as stand-up material, which he performs. His non-Trek interests include females, music, females, television, females, trivia, females, writing, and females. Elliot Miller is 22, a McGill graduate and currently taking an MBA at Concordia University. He too writes songs and prose fiction. He shares most of Louis' interests, especially females.

This column is about Star Trek humour. We will be dealing with a variety of topics, from analyses of the characters' relationships (eg, Scott and McCoy—are the rumours really true?) to the characters themselves (when Spock joined Starfleet, was he really wet behind the ears?), to things we'd like to see (based on moments from the series as well as on things we know a certain person might do).

We now present the first in a series of parodies of episode summaries. Occasionally, the parody we originally wrote had a distinctly Canadian flavour (just like the way we spell that word!). In these cases, we've added a non-regional version so you can laugh, too (we hope).

EPISODES THAT NEVER QUITE MADE IT

1. **THE SAND TRAP:** While playing golf on Planet M113, the Enterprise crew discover a monster that can change identity to become a sand trap at the most inconvenient time and place for them.
2. **CHARLIE'S HEX:** A space traveler named Charlie inflicts the Enterprise with a curse that fills the bridge viewing screen with unending pictures of three scantily-dressed 20th Century girls in a vain attempt at acting.
3. **WHERE NO MAN HAS GONE BEFORE** (Story of a Teenage Virgin): Captain Kirk encounters a force field on the rim of his latest female yeoman and burns out his drive.
4. **THE NAKED THIGHS:** A virus from planet Thi 2000 releases the crew's inhibitions. Kirk paws Lt. Uhura under the pretext of a "security check". After a dozen or so such procedures, Kirk then attempts romantic interludes with his intercom system and three pet tribbles. Spock and McCoy decide to lock the captain up until his strange drives are spent. They release him 18 months later (see also WHERE NO MAN...).
5. **THE ENEMA WITHIN:** A transporter malfunction over planet Alfa 177 inflicts the landing party with intestinal problems, depleting Dr. McCoy's stock.
6. **MUDD'S MEN:** On Harry Mudd's first interstellar flight he is transporting men for procreative purposes to Oyvey IX, and meets up with Captain Kirk. Sad to say, this adventure was not too successful—or even interesting—so we've decided to stop recounting it right here.
7. **WHAT ARE LITTLE GIRLS REALLY MADE OF?:** While attending a biology class on Planet Exo III conducted by the noted pediatrician, Dr. Roman Polanski plugging his new book, CLOSE ENCOUNTERS WITH THE THIRD GRADE), McCoy turns red-faced after a young ensign demand to know if babies do indeed come from microchips. He turns the question over to Spock, who flushes olive-green and leaves the room.
8. **MIRI, MIRI, QUITE SO DREARY:** The Enterprise crew finds a motley group of children led by a girl named Miri, whose garden, which is the source of the kids' food, has failed due to a cockleshell drought. Obviously blind from hunger, Miri falls in love with the only provider of food, Captain Kirk, and schemes to keep him with her. But Kirk explains that Miri's feelings are only puppy love. The children are relocated and Kirk buys Miri a cocker spaniel.
9. **THE DAGGER OF THE MOUTH:** On the Tantalus V penal colony, Dr. Tristan Adams has developed a simple method of torturing prisoners into subservience. He plays tapes of Howard Cosell on the Neural Neutralizer.
10. **THE GORDON LIGHTFOOT MANEUVER** (Canadian version): In a desperate effort to avoid destruction at the hands of Balok, Kirk threatens to jettison a tape of the complete works of Canada's favourite folk artist if Balok doesn't stop.
11. **THE CORBOMITE REMOVER** (American version): At Balok's insistence, Kirk produces a vial marked Corbomite, whereupon Balok counters with one marked
- 11a. **CORBOMITE REMOVER** (by Johnson & Johnson). This stalemate proves crucial in the negotiating process (for folk-music haters, we strongly recommend Proctor & Gamble's Gordon Lightfoot Remover).
12. **THE STAGE:** Captain Pike is captured by the Talosians and is forced to perform for their amusement. At first he refuses, but after some gentle prodding (read: torture) Pike recites the entire Webster Dictionary (including Appendix), 17 Shakespeare plays, and an hour of Don Rickles material (You try to call a Talosian a hockey puck!)
13. **THE CONSCIENCE OF THE KING:** Kirk, Spock, and the Enterprise crew are faced with the dilemma of discovering Kodos' identity, and conduct a seance reaching back into the 20th century to contact the only known ancestor of Kodos—Elvis Presley.

14. **BALANCING ERRORS:** Captain Kirk discovers that he has been laid off due to accounting errors which have mistakenly indicated that he is actually worth the amount he is getting paid. After demoting Spock to electrician and Scotty to bartender in order to cut costs, Kirk takes only the practical course of action available to him: he fires the accountant.
15. **SHORE 'NUFF LEAVE:** The Enterprise crew take a well-deserved rest on Disney's Planet, where Kirk meets old nemesis Lt. Funnyman; McCoy, stupefied into repeating "sho 'nuff", sees a pair of white rabbits—and another—and another—and another; Rodriquez sees a flock of birds, but looks up at the wrong time; and Sulu is pursued by a giant illusion-sandwich which he calls a "salmon-on-rye". A man called the Undertaker explains the planet's situation before the birds ruin more than a few hats and shawls.
16. **THE ERNEST AND JULIO GALLO SEVEN:** Spock, McCoy, Scotty, and four crewmen on board a shuttlecraft shaped like a bottle of cheap California wine are forced to crashland at Taurus II when the bottle pops its cork.
17. **THE SQUARE OF GOTHOS:** The Enterprise landing party encounters Trelane, an overgrown child-man with a crewcut who plays chess and listens to 18th-Century music. Kirk challenges him to a marathon of smoking, as Spock puts it, "unusually-shaped tobacco packets." His parents appear at the last minute to save the day, telling Trelane to "cool it, man."
18. **ATHENA:** The inhabitants of Cestus III are discovered to have died from an explosion of the eardrum inflicted by a travelling rock band. The Metronomes arrange for a showdown between Captain Kirk and the leader of the Horn, Pete Townshend. Kirk and Townshend battle it out on a planet strewn with electric guitars, amplifiers and microphones.
19. **IF TODAY IS TOMORROW, AND YESTERDAY IS TODAY, THEN TOMORROW MUST BE YESTERDAY:** The ship's computer goes berserk from overwork and lets forth the above bewildering statement. Mr. Spock, in a state of shock, keeps repeating, "That is not logical...that is not logical...THAT IS NOT LOGICAL!"
20. **KANGAROO COURT:** Lt. Cmdr. Ben Funny (no relation to Funnyman; see SNL) fakes his own death so that he can continue his torrent of practical jokes on the Enterprise crew. Unfortunately, he toys with the computer, making it look like Kirk had destroyed Earth and the Federation. This brings Kirk up on charges, having been accused by Cmdr. Stoneface. Kirk's attorney, Samuel T. Serious, finds a loophole and hangs Funny with it.
21. **THE RETURN OF THE ARCHIES:** The culture of Beta III is backward and static. After all, they still listen to a bunch of studio musicians from the 1960's. Kirk convinces the Archies that their so-called music is stifling the culture, so they return to their comic books and Beta III reverts to normalcy.
22. **SPACE PITS:** The Enterprise discovers a sleeper ship, the SS CORDOBA, and revives its crew. The group is led by Khan Singh, who ruled 1/4 of Earth, including a tropical island paradise, back in the 1990's. Khan has gone mad with power—and a bit crazy. He wants to cover the entire ship in rich Corinthian leather. Kirk and Scott weaken Khan by depriving him of the last drop of his coffee, and send Cmdr. Young to convince and defeat him with such lines as "How's my favourite conqueror of Earth today? Why so tense, Khan? But this IS 100% real coffee!" etc., etc.
23. **A TASTE OF ARM N' HAMMER:** While on Eminor VII negotiating peace with Vendikar, Ambassador Robert Fox tastes the local delicacy of baking soda, and starts acting fresh for a month.
24. **THIS SIDE OF PITTSBURGH:** The Enterprise visits Omicron Philly III and encounters a group of spores that induce disgust and revulsion. This leads to unbecoming language, and finally a brawl among the ship's personnel. Fortunately, the effect is only temporary, and once the spores' influence is past the Enterprise returns to its mission of starting a challenge baseball game with the Klingon Empire (see also EM).

25. **THE DEBIT IN THE BANK:** An unknown menace is roaming the bank accounts of the miners on Janus VI, withdrawing large sums of money and destroying reputations. Mr. Spock does a mindmeld with a bank book and discovers that the bank's computer hates having to perform deposit and withdrawal entries and can't understand why people are wearing out all his fellow computers with all their accounting entries. The men agree to withdraw their money, and the computer adjusts their accounts—less a substantial penalty for early withdrawal.
26. **ERROR OF MERCY:** Organian shortstop Trefayne purposely bobbles an easy grounder as an act of mercy to the Federation/Klingon All-Star team, which is losing 37-0. (See also TSP).
27. **ALTERNATIVE FACTORS:** The crew encounters rival mathematicians Lazarus A and B, who have such diverging theories about factoring equations, arguing over the last digit of pi, and calculating how to get the caramel into a Caramilk bar, that Kirk is forced to send both Lazaruses (Lazari?) into the "alternative warp" so they can argue away from everyone else.
28. **SITTING ON THE EDGE OF NEVER-NEVER:** Running through the Guardian to Never-Never Land, the landing party find themselves aboard a pirate ship which is firing on a little guy dressed in a funny suit flying around the boat.
29. **OPERATION: VIOLATE:** A crime epidemic has rendered life miserable on Deneva. Captain Kirk says the Enterprise must find two specimens of the flying creatures that cause it: one for a Starfleet museum, and one for lab examination—make that 2 for examination: someone just stole the first one.
30. **ALPO TIME:** Spock develops a sudden, unexpected craving for dog food, interrupting the Enterprise's journey to Altered Sex. He explains that this ailment afflicts Vulcans every seven years (that's 49 to you and me). Kirk and McCoy ignore Spock until, upon hearing Kirk call McCoy "Bones", he bites the doctor in the leg and starts to dig up the bridge (note how we resisted the temptation to mention Colonel Greene!).
31. **WHO MOURNS FOR FERRAGAMO (Canadian version):** On Pollus IV, Kirk and a landing party find a quarterback who claims to be Vince Ferragamo (a contradiction in itself), last of the long-dead Montreal Alouettes football team. The other Alouettes have died from embarrassment. Ferragamo wonders why people don't worship him anymore and wants the Enterprise crew to do so. (Again, we didn't mention how he made a pass at Lt. Palamas! We can control ourselves, you know.)
- 31a. **WHO MOURNS FOR KHOMEINI? (American version):** On Pollus IV, the landing party finds a a sweet old man claiming to be Ruhollah Khomeini (a contradiction in itself), who can't understand why the Federation doesn't worship him. He convinces the crew to bring him aboard the Enterprise, but when they pipe him aboard with a song by SHAH NAH NAH he flees, and transports himself down into a sea of molten lava.
32. **THE CHAISE LOUNGE:** A discarded 21st century sofa collides with an Earth probe sent to sterilize soil samples. The samples regenerate and expand instantly to the point where Nomad is an island (but small, not a 3-mile island)! Sofa, so good!
33. **MIRROR, RORRIM:** While beaming up during an Ion storm, Kirk and his landing party are sent through the looking glass (or mirror) into Wonderland, where they become pieces of a giant chessboard.
34. **THE ATARI:** Kirk and company combat Space Invaders, Pacmen, and Gorfs (Gorves?) to get to the heart of the computer that rules the citizens of Gamma Trianguli VI. They succeed, with advice from Commodore Vic XX.
35. **THE TUESDAY MACHINE:** A giant ice-cream cone has devoured the Malurian system, capturing a double Decker before meeting the Enterprise. Spock discovers that it only eats on Tuesdays, so he fills the Constellation with Pistachio and rams the mess down its throat.
36. **CAT'S GUT:** On Planet Pyrus VII, the Enterprise crew discovers that what they thought was broiled chicken turned out to be Garfield Flambe.

37. I'M MUDD: The Enterprise discovers that Harcourt Fenton Mudd was actually created by the androids on their planet, where the androids argue whether to use Mudd for pies or for slinging at politicians.
38. MOTOR FOR SIS: Kirk, Spock, McCoy and Nancy Hedford encounter Zephren Cochrane, the noted car thief. Cochrane steals the Gallileo's batteries and intends to strand the crew until he discovers that Nancy is his long-lost sister, and restores the batteries as a present to her.
39. BABELING JOURNEY: The universal translator aboard the Enterprise breaks down, rendering it impossible for any of the diplomats aboard to understand or quarrel with each other, so Kirk lays down in his cabin and has a nice long nap for the rest of the episode.
40. FRIDAY'S CHILD: Robinson Crusoe discovers that Friday is really a male-impersonator. They get married, and their kid becomes the first Teer of Capella IV.
41. THE DEADLY EARS: On Gamma Hydra IV, the landing party contracts a disease which causes sparks to appear from their ears. Mr. Spock's ears backfire and drain the dilithium crystals from the matter/antimatter chamber. McCoy and Dr. Wallace use the Johnsons' special wax, appropriately called (you guests it) Robert and Elaine's wax, to save the day. ((Ed. note — I assume that our Canadian readers are in hysterics by now, but we didn't get it.))
42. OBESITY: A deadly cloud creature that causes humans to eat incessantly, reappears to haunt Captain Kirk after 11 years. Kirk, who had blamed himself for going off his diet, realizes he had been under the cloud's control. Kirk discovers the solution: he starts eating anti-matter, frustrating the cloud, which self-destructs.
43. GOLF IN THE COLD: While recovering from a head wound incurred from a stray golf ball hit by a female duffer, which in turn caused him to see birdies, Scotty is framed for the nightclub murder of a local golf pro on Argelius. The Enterprise is able to get him off Scott-free that time, but encounter greater troubles when the engineer is arrested for committing the most serious Argelius crime — double bogeying.
44. A TRUNKFUL OF TRINKETS (American version only): Cyrano Jones has a thriving business selling packaged trinkets from various planets out of his travelling trunk, until the Space Teamsters catch up with him for selling items without a Union label.
45. THE HAMSTERS OF RED SKELTON: Kirk, Uhura and Chekov are beamed off the Enterprise to an uncharted planet where they are turned into small furry animals. They are met by clones of Freddy the Freeloader, who informs them they are to perform as gladiators. The trio is en-thrall-ed at the prospect, and do so well that the controlling brain lets them go with a "Good night and God bless!"
46. PEACE FOR THE FACTION: Kirk and Spock beam down to Planet Eye Lotion II, where rival gangs with bosses vie for the lion's share of the planet's cosmetic trade. Their culture is base on a glamour magazine left 100 years earlier by the U.S. Her-Eyes-On. Kirk gets the Eye Lotions to abandon this culture by introducing them to that centuries-old classic, the Kama Sutra.
47. THE IMPURITY SYNDROME: So named because of its lack of pure originality. Take three parts DOOMSDAY MACHINE, one part LIGHTS OF ZETAR, and a dash of OBSESSION, and you have this episode, summed up best by Lt. Jose "Speedy" Gonzales, who, on the sighting of the object, exclaimed, "Amoeba! Amoeba! Undele! Undele!"
48. A PRIVATE LITTLE WHORE: An Enterprise landing party sets out to discover why there is increased activity on peaceful Norule. Spock is hit by a Flintstone, fired from a flintlock rifle. Kirk has his life save by Nono (whom the guys call YesYes), a Can-You-Too bitch doctor. Kirk meets his old friend, Tired He, and begins to realize why the Klingons are so bent on taking the planet.

49. **STAYING HERE TODAY:** Kirk and crew discover three superbeings who wish to borrow their bodies and use their hands, heads, eyes, and legs for their own purposes. McCoy deduces that with their attitudes, they must be from the government. The leader, Far Gone, makes an appeal to Kirk, but Spock observes that the planet Arret is actually Terra, reversed, so a compromise is reached. Bodies are indeed exchanged - but Kirk exchanges with Spock, Scotty with McCoy, and Far Gone with his wife, I'll-Ace-Ya. The superbeings decide that mankind is far too silly to be reasoned with, and depart for oblivion (which, by the way, is just west of Cleveland).
50. **PLATTERS OF FORKS:** This episode was too heart-wrenching for we Jewish guys to parody directly. But it COULD have been a case of the Zeons, the Etiquette race, attempting to civilize the unetiquetted people of Eggos - using proper plates, glasses, etc. There are problems, including numerous spoonerisms, and the famous joke, "Take my knife - please!" Or "Who was that ladle I saw you with?" "That was no ladle, that was my knife!"
51. **A ROSE BY ANY OTHER NAME IS A WEED:** The Enterprise is tricked into acting as a supertaxi for the Kelvans on their trip to the Andromeda Galaxy. Kirk discovers that a way to get rid of the passengers is to turn the thermostat down to -273° Celsius - i.e. zero Kelvan. The Kelvans develop Andromeda Strain and disappear.
52. **THE OH-MY-GOD GLORY:** The Enterprise finds a group of people on Omega IV, descended from 20th century Earth, whose only replica of that era is a cassette of One Day at a Time with Bonnie Franklin going "Oh, my God!"
53. **THE INTIMATE COMPUTER:** An advanced computer introduced by Dr. Richard Daystrom malfunctions after only two days. An extensive analysis discovers that it has fallen in love with the Enterprise's life support systems. The jealous phaser banks misfire in frustration.
54. **THE IMPASSE:** On Menorah II, Kirk, Spock and McCoy look for two lost scientists and find the missing Linke. The Viands have captured a precious Gem and are attempting to use her race for candle production. Kirk and Spock are maneuvered into feeding McCoy to the Viands, but Kirk refuses to let him die, thus creating an impasse. Gem reads between the Viands, saves McCoy, and Thann, decides to Lal him to sleep.
55. **SOPHIE'S TROYIUS:** The Enterprise is sent to pick up Ambassador Peach Tree and Sophie, the Doorman of the Hotel Alas. She is to marry the leader of Peach Tree's planet, making it a very Troyius occasion. However, her lover, Cretin, turns traitor and warps her drive before checking out for good. Kirk and Sophie have a brief affair, but the other hotel employees, knowing his reputation, turn a blind eye to it. Sophie returns to marry President Alack Yutu, and they make a great pair - Alas and (we couldn't resist) Yutu.
56. **73% — THE MARK OF GIDDYUP:** Kirk and crew stirrup trouble on the equestrian planet of Giddyup, when they discover the population is crowded into a very small section of the planet. The reason for this: the Giddyuppers must pass a horse-back riding test, or else they are saddled with the rest of the population, walking amongst the horse-droppings. So while 1% of the people ride high, the others get into it up to their knees.
57. **THAT WHICH SURVIVES, BUT I'M DEAD:** Kirk and his landing party meet up with Loose Era, the only survivor of the Kalandan race (which makes the decathlon look like a cakewalk). The race includes the galaxy's biggest chug-a-lug contest. A huge burp from the planet sends the Enterprise crew 990.7 light beers away, while Loose Era greets (and kills) people with the salutation "This Bud's for you." Spock deduces there's a storm brewing and shows you can't slip anything Pabst him.
58. **THE FLIGHTS ARE LATER:** The spaceship carrying the information from Memory Alphabet takes a sudden turn and heads west instead of east. Scotty's latest

love, Mira, a descendant of Romaine warriors, mourns the lost of her luggage, also on the spaceship. She must Romaine behind while the Enterprise is fogged up over the planet.

59. REQUEST FOR SCOTCH AND SODA: The Enterprise crew is dying of thirst brought upon by Rye-Chilling Fever. The only know antidote is Rye-Italian style, found only on planet Cold Beer 917G. Kirk, Spock and McCoy realize this is whiskey business, but use Mr. Flaunt (recluse and braggart) to keep everyone's spirits up. This task is diverted by Kirk's attraction to Rayna Kaopectate, who gives him a real run for his money before he shouts, "Rayna, Rayna, go awayna!"
60. THE WAY TO ETON: A bunch of barefoot misfits run away from the Thames River in search of an aristocratic British college. Upon finding it, they manage to win over the stodgy student body to their free-spirited way of life, only to end up burning their feet on various marijuana joints discarded throughout campus. (Note: Canadian version — THE WAY TO EATON'S.)
61. THE CROWD-MINDERS: In concert on the planet Ardent, the featured musical group, the Troggs, suddenly and inexplicably disappear. Naturally the officials find them by Trogg lights. They make friends in high Plasus, although the Jewish leaders of the underground complain, "Ve Vanna better vay of life!" The Enterprise is called in to keep the Ardent fans away from any pushers who might be into Droxines.
62. THE IRON CURTAIN: On the continental surface of Excalbia, Kirk discovers a Lincoln. (Get it? Continental?) Kirk is told, "Yarnek's on the line," as he and Spock confront some evil characters — Zora the Greek, a Klingon who becomes Kahless in his duties, and Genghis Khan, the despot who had a movie named after him (obviously the wrath of Genghis), as well as their leader, Colonel Constant Lee Disa Green. Kirk and Spock realize something's weird when Lincoln admits knowing the ancient Vulcan philosophical problem: There is a place where Nome man has gone before. Juneau? (No, I don't. Alaska.)
63. WHOM FADS DESTROY: Arriving at the Melba Toast II Fat Colony, Kirk meets his friend Governor Hori-cory, who introduces him to Girth-of-a-Czar, who rebelled against the exercising people from Head Antos, and was banished. After taking Kirk and Spock prisoner and sacrificing his honey, Marta (of the Orion singing group, Marta and the Muffins), Girth attempts to destroy everyone by an overdose of exploding Tang flavour crystals, and assuming Kirk's body. Spock saves the day by finding out which Kirk is in good shape, and beats Girth to a pulp.
64. YESTERDAYS OF OUR LIVES: Spock and McCoy are thrown in to the past, where they meet Mary Beth, an exile from Sarpeidon's Mountain. She calls the Vulcan "Spock-Boy," and warns the doctor about the Hatfields. Meanwhile, Jim-Bob Kirk is imprisoned in a later era, accused of being a witch. His clever legal council gets him off on a technicality — only women are witches; men are WARLOCKS!! Kirk weasels his way back to the present and uses the Hitachi Atavachron to bring his friends back from the Little Cave on the Prairie.
- And last, but certainly not least:
65. TURNABOUT IN TRUDEAU: Realizing that the Federation Ruling Council does not accept anyone over the age of 200, Pierre Elliot Trudeau decides to use equipment he discovered on Cannibus II to switch bodies with a young, healthy James Kirk. Now in the revitalized body, Trudeau attempts to regain his post as leader of Canada, intending to complete his 67th term. Kirk, in his "new" 200-year-old body, realizes something's wrong when it takes him 15 minutes to issue the command "Deflectors up," and when he starts sprouting phrases like "Stay in the East" and "Detach Quebec drive!" Kirk/T rectifies the situation after Trudeau/K learns that his former country has annexed the United Earth nations, and is therefore no longer under his jurisdiction, forcing Trudeau/K to return to his own body (in the attempt to reach his new goal — becoming master of space, time and dimension — democratically), and allowing Kirk and the Enterprise crew to continue to their way.

DID YOU EVER WONDER—

—why, in REQUIEM FOR METHUSELAH, did Trek not use a really ancient guy, like Mel Brooks' 2,000-year-old man? Or better yet, why not George Burns? Look the man's old enough to play God, and nobody complained about the age difference there!

—how the series of androids in I, MUDD worked out? If there are 3 sets of 500 of each android, as there seemed to be, except for Norman, how the hell could they have ended up with 207,809! That would mean 415 sets of 500 with 308 remaining! According to our Idi Amin calculator ("you do the work—and if you're wrong...."), 207,809 divides only by a factor of 7, yielding 29,687 which, when divided by 7 again leaves 4,241, apparently a prime number with no other factors. Louis concluded this inquiry with a big "so what!" But at least you'll be able to tell friends at cocktail parties that if all sets of androids were created equally—that is, male sets, female sets, and insets—then including Norman(s) there would be 4,241 sets of 49. Or vice-versa. (By the way, on 829 B.C.E. on his this date the Saxons were conquered by a people called the Normans—also the Freds, the Irvings, the Charlies, and Mr. Goldbloom the furrier.)

—why Captain Kirk always insists that something is "Impossible", and not only does it invariably happen, but is usually incredibly obvious?

—how crewmembers can survive for years at a time on a starship without ever once having to go to the bathroom?

—what would happen if Kang's wife, the leader of the Onlies, and Lt. Romaine were involved in an alternate universe episode? That would be Mara, Miri, and Mira in MIRROR, MIRROR (or maybe not....).

—why Chekov never wrote any more plays? We enjoyed THE SEAGULL and THE CHERRY ORCHARD—why stop there?

—exactly what colour IS a Roddenberry?

—what would have happened in THE NAKED TIME if instead of an itchy nose, Joe Tormolen had an itchy tushy? Try to visualize the disease spreading THEN!

—or in JOURNEY OF BABEL, when Sarek tells McCoy he is 102.437, measured in our years. What does he use, dog years? (That works out to 717.059, by the way.) For that matter, what was Sarek doing there, if he was retired? Just going along for the ride?

—or even, in PATTERNS OF FORCE, if Chairman ENEG is "Gene" spelled backwards, then there must be other significant reverse-names: the protagonist, Kasi; his brother, Morba; Deputy Secretary Sarad; Deputy Fuhrer Nokalem; and of course our own Krik and Kcops!

TREKWIZ #1

These 20 questions are based on events taken solely from the TV series. Only a real Treksperit will score over 90 points. Consider 80 as excellent, 70 as very good, 55-60 as good. We've included some bonus questions, too.

1. Which episodes contained ONLY characters that appeared in at least one other episode? (i.e., regular crew) 4 points.
2. What is plomeek? (Not all of these questions are long). 2 points.
3. What is Bele's official title? 2 points.
4. Name the Federation starships that were destroyed, or found destroyed, in the following episodes: a) THE DOOMSDAY MACHINE, b) THE THOLIAN WEB, c) THE ULTIMATE COMPUTER, d) THE IMMUNITY SYNDROME? 4 points.
5. Which Earp brother "killed" Chekov? Which did Kirk almost kill? 2 points.
6. Name the three starship commanders we meet, and their ships. 6 points.
7. Name the two captains of smaller vessels we meet in CHARLIE X and BREAD AND CIRCUSES, and the number of crewmen on each ship. 4 points.

8. Give the code number of Gary Seven (not 7), and those of his two dead subordinates. 3 points.
9. Name all 5 (if you can) Lt. Commanders on the Enterprise. Consider Spock a full commander. (5 points—obviously)
10. With what, or whom, do you associate the following names: Claymare, Gav, Kalo, Kor, Kras, Plasus, Sirah, Tharn, Zora? (a big 18 points)
11. Which three Starfleet officers (titles not necessary, 1 bonus point each), along with Commodore Stone, preside at Kirk's court martial? 3 points.
12. Which 4 crewmembers died in THE APPLE? What (if anything) did Kirk know about them? 6 points.
13. How long, to the nearest half-year, has it been since Kirk last saw Janet Wallace? Areel Shaw? Janice Lester? 3 points.
14. Which part of Earth did Khan N. Singh rule from 1992 through 1996? (Hint: he never approached Canada or Luxembourg.) 2 points.
15. Where do we find reference to: Canada? Australia? Martian colonies? Rigel? Tau Ceti? 5 points.
16. In what episodes do we find these starbases: 2, 4, 6, 10, 11 12, 27? (9 points, plus give yourself a bonus if you can figure out why the question is worth 9 points)
17. Spock's copper-based blood poses both advantages and disadvantages. In two episodes, it saves his life, but in at least one other it adds to his discomfort. Name these occasions. (3 points)
18. What special non-physical traits distinguish the following races: Tellerites, Orion women, Antosians? 6 points.
19. What are two shuttlecraft mentioned in the episodes? Give a serial number. 3 points.
20. And finally — except for Uhura and Sulu, every main Enterprise crew member has had at least one love affair that we've seen. Give 2 examples of this for Kirk, Spock, McCoy, Scott, Chekov, and Nurse Chapel.

ANSWERS TO TREKWIZ I

1. The only episodes that contained only the regulars were IMMUNITY SYNDROME and THOLIAN WEB. If you can justify another, give yourself 2 points plus the bonus.
2. Plomeek is a thick orange Vulcan soup.
3. Bele is the Chief Officer on the Commission of Political Traitors (or so he says).
4. a) Constellation, b) Defiant, c) Excaltibur, 3) Intrepid. The Valiant was destroyed both in WHERE NO MAN HAS GONE BEFORE and A TASTE OF ARMAGEDDON.
5. Morgan Earp; "He wasn't dead" doesn't answer the question—no points for that response.
6. Bob Wesley—Lexington, Mathew Decker—Constellation, and Ron Tracey—Exeter.
7. CHARLIE X: Captain Remart; BREAK AND CIRCUSES: R. M. Merik. Their vessels had crews of 20 and 45 respectively. The vessels were the Antares and the Beagle. (Note: no points for the ships unless you guessed their crew within 10.)
8. Gary Seven's code name is Supervisor 194; subordinates were Agents 201 and 347.
9. Scott, McCoy, Finney (he was there), Mitchell (so was he), and Kelowitz.
10. Claymare: member of the Organian council; Gav: Tellerite ambassador; Kalo: "Employee" of Bela Oomyz; Kor: Klingon temporary governor of Organia; Kras: Klingon negotiator on Capella IV (FRIDAY'S CHILD); Sirah: Cloud William's mate (OMEGA GLOVE); Tharn: Leader of the Halkan Council (MIRROR, MIRROR); Zora: "Chemist" from Tiburon (SAVAGE CURTAIN).
11. Captain Chandra, Space Command Representative Lindstrom, and Captain Krasnowsky.

12. Hendorff, Kaplan, Mallory, and Marple; Kirk knew Kaplan's family, and Mallory's father helped Kirk get into Starfleet Academy.
13. Janet Wallace: 6 years, 4 months+; Arel Shaw: 4 years, 6 months+; Janice Lester: last year at Starfleet (no specific date).
14. From Asia through the Middle East. Give full credit for Near East, Southeast Asia, North Africa, or Egypt as borders. The "1/4 of Earth" is not necessary.
15. Canada: TROUBLE WITH TRIBES (see our first column); Australia: SPACE SEED, Botany Bay Colony; Martian Colonies: COURT MARTIAL (list) or LIGHTS OF ZETAR (Mira's home planet); Rigel: any of 4 episodes (DOOMSDAY MACHINE, JOURNEY TO BABEL, WOLF IN THE FOLD, REQUIEM FOR METHUSELAH); Tau Cet: WHOM GODS DESTROY, strategic site of defeat of Roman ship.
16. Starbase 2: TURNABOUT INTRUDER; 4: CHILDREN SHALL LEAD or LAST BATTLEFIELD; 6: IMMUNITY SYNDROME; 10: DEADLY YEARS; 11: METAMORPHOSIS; 12: WHERE NO MAN OR SPACE SEED; 27: THIS SIDE OF PARADISE.
17. Upon closer examination of the episodes, I have determined that there are several for each category. Give yourself full credit for listing any of MAN TRAP, MIRI, and DEADLY YEARS as Spock's built-in advantages, part credit for OPERATION ANNIHILATE, IMMUNITY SYNDROME, RETURN TO TOMORROW, SPOCK'S BRAIN, SPECTRE OF THE GUN, IS THERE IN TRUTH NO BEAUTY, as in these it's not specifically Spock's blood which saves him, but is a contributing factor. As a disadvantage, full credit for APPLE, AMOK TIME, PLATO'S STEPCHILDREN, and ALL OUR YESTERDAYS.
18. Tellarites argue for no reason—like certain XXXXXX's I know; Orion women are sensual and no male can resist them (with reason); Antosians are renowned for their peaceful and scientific reputation (WHOM GODS DESTROY).
19. The Enterprise has the Columbus and the Galileo, serial number NCC 1701/7.
20. Kirk: are you kidding? With reason, give credit for any two episodes; Spock: THIS SIDE OF PARADISE, AMOK TIME, and/or ALL OUR YESTERDAYS, part credit for CLOUD MINDERS, and no credit for JOURNEY TO BABEL, MCCOY: MAN TRAP, SHORE LEAVE, FOR THE WORLD IS HOLLOW, Scott: WHO MOURNS FOR ADONAI, LIGHTS OF ZETAR, part credit for WOLF IN THE FOLD; Chekov: APPLE, SPECTRE OF THE GUN, WAY TO EDEN; Chapel: WHAT ARE LITTLE GIRLS MADE OF and PLATO'S STEPCHILDREN (illustrating her love for Spock).

TREKWIZ #2

1. Name the starship (2 points) and serial number (3 points) Kirk served on with Ben Finney. (COURT MARTIAL)
2. How long did Spock serve under Christopher Pike? (3 points)
3. What did the adults in AND THE CHILDREN SHALL LEAD die of? (3 points)
4. Name the 2 Eyemorgs we meet. (2 points)
5. In GALILEO SEVEN, Kirk's standing order is to investigate...what? (2 points)
One particular version appears in the episode. What is it called? (3 points)
6. In PARADISE SYNDROME, Sulu claims the deflection is "insufficient." Just how (in) efficient is it, exactly? (3 points)
7. Who operates the transporter in THOLIAN WEB? (2 points). In DAGGER OF THE MIND? (4 points)
8. Besides Kirk and Spock, name the other members of the landing party in ARENA. (6 points)
9. What is the planet (3 points) and the star system (3 points) in RETURN OF THE ARCHONS?
10. When Sargon invades Kirk's body, what is his/their heartbeat? (3 points)
11. In FRIDAY'S CHILD, the Enterprise receives two distress calls. From what ships do they come, and what are their classifications? (3 points)
12. Match the landing party with their "other selves" in SPECTRE OF THE GUN. (5 points)

13. Name ALL vessels involved in the ULTIMATE COMPUTER. (6 points)
14. Where does "Korby's Kirk" want to settle? (3 points)
15. Name at least 7 crewmembers affected in NAKED TIME. (7 points). BONUS: Name all 10. (3 points more)
16. In FOR THE WORLD IS HOLLOW AND I HAVE TOUCHED THE SKY, the asteroid is on a collision course with an inhabited planet. Name the planet, its population, and the estimated time to collision. (6 points.)
17. Name the only teaser (opening scene, before credits) that has NO Enterprise crew members.
18. What is the IDIC? (2 points). BONUS: What do the letters stand for? (1 point)
19. In THE EMPATH, name the quote, the quoter, in the teaser. (3 points). BONUS: Name the reference. (2 points)
20. Finally, the "essay question:" Name at least TEN gods, goddesses, and mortals mentioned in WHO MOURNS FOR ADONIS. (20 points). BONUS: Name all 14! (4 points)

ANSWERS TO TREKWIZ #2

1. USS Republic, NCC-1371.
2. 11 years, 4 months, 5 days. One point for 11 or 12 years, 2 points within 3 months either way.
3. They took zylot in poisoning. "Poisoning" gets you one lousy point.
4. Luma, the one with the mind of a child, and Kara, the leader. One point for each.
5. Kirk investigates all quasars and quasar-like phenomenon. This one is called Murasaki 312. One point for "Murasaki."
6. The angle is a mere .0013 degrees. One point for "negligible to .01 degrees," full credit for .001 degrees or .002 degrees.
7. O'Neil and Lt. Berkeley, respectively.
8. McCoy, Kelowitz, Lang and Herlity. No points for McCoy, 2 points for each of the others.
9. Beta III, star system C111.
10. 262. Two points for the 200-300 range.
11. First the SS Dieder, a freighter, and next from the USS Carolina, a starship.
12. Kirk—like Clanton; Spock—Frank McClovery; Chekov—Billy Claibourne; McCoy—Tom McClovery; Scott—Billy Clanton. One point each.
13. The four "war games" ships, the Lexington, Excalibur, Hood, Potemkin; the ore ship, the Woden, and don't forget the Enterprise. One point each.
14. Midas V. Two points for Midas.
15. The ten, in order, are: Joe Tormolen, Kevin Riley, Lt. Sulu, Nurse Chapel, the laughing crewman, the singing crewman, Janice Rand, Spock, Kirk, and McCoy's biopsy lab attendant, Harrison.
16. Daran V, population: 3.724 billion (i.e. Earth), 396 days. Two points for each, one point for good estimates.
17. TOMORROW IS YESTERDAY only shows the Enterprise in the sky before a fade.
18. It's the most revered of Vulcan symbols. IDIC: Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations.
19. "In His hands are the deep places of the earth." Dr. Ozaba quotes from Psalm 95, Verse 4.
20. They are, in no particular order: Zeus, Hermes, Hera, Aphrodite, Athena, Agamemnon, Hector, Odysseus, Pan, Artemis, Hercules, and the mortal women Ieda, Daphne, and Cassandra.

Rate yourself: 90-100 points: you wrote this quiz! 80 is fantastic, 70 is excellent, 60 good, 50 fair, 40 — well, better luck next time.

THE "NOW I'VE HEARD EVERYTHING" QUIZ
(Based on the First Season Episodes)

WHO MADE THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS—TO WHOM—WHEN???

1. "The best diplomat I know is a fully activated phaser bank?"
2. "I'll say this for you, Mudd—you're not a liar."
3. "Mind your own business ... I'm sick of your ... interference, do you hear?"
4. "A little suffering is good for the soul."
5. "Why don't you go chase an asteroid?"
6. "I'll protect you, fair maiden."
7. "Why not Outer Mongolia?"
8. "Walking freezer unit?"
9. "I want it to look like turkey."
10. "They're beings — they're superior."

ANSWERS TO THE "NOW I'VE HEARD EVERYTHING QUIZ

1. Scotty, to McCoy et al, after Ambassador Fox declares he'll deal with the
Emulians diplomatically. A TASTE OF ARMAGEDDON
2. Childress to Harry Mudd, upon seeing Mudd's women—a lot he knows!; MUDD'S
WOMEN
3. The Kirk replica to Spock—blanks are "Mr. Spock" and "half-breed"
McCoy—actually, Kirk quotes McCoy as saying that (who denies it, as would we
all)
5. Janice to the crewman Green monster
6. Sulu to Uhura, under the influence of the Psi 2000 virus
7. Kirk to Spock, back on Earth in 1930, figuring where McCoy will pop up. CITY
ON THE EDGE OF FOREVER
8. Mitchell to Kelso about Dr. Dehner. WHERE NO MAN HAS GONE BEFORE.
9. Kirk to cooks for Thanksgiving dinner. CHARLIE X
10. Trelane's dad to his son. SQUIRE OF GOLOS.

THE WORLD'S HARDEST TREKWIZ I
(Based On First-Season Episodes Only)

1. IN THIS SIDE OF PARADISE, how many men does McCoy report to have examined?
(2 points). What is their age range? (3 points).
2. Later in that same episode — what do Kirk and the newly cured Spock build?
(3 points)
3. IN ERRAND OF MERCY, what unit reports the Klingon invasion? (5 points)
4. Also from EM, what do the Klingons do after Kirk and Spock escape? (4 points)
5. In BALANCE OF TERROR, what sector does the map on the Enterprise show? (A
whopping 7 points)
6. More BT: Name the comet that plays a significant red herring role. (4 points.
Bonus: What is its magnitude? (5 points)
7. in THE MENAGERIE, WHO HAS MENTIONED Kirk to Miss Piper? (3 points)
8. While we're at it, how much fuel is left in Kirk's shuttlecraft? (4 points)
9. Name three of the elements mined in DEVIL IN THE DARK. (6 points) Bonus:
name all five elements. (4 points)
10. Who are Kirk and Giotto's other security head (also in DD). (4 points)
11. Name Kirk's three "friends" he sees at the bar in COURT MARTIAL. (6 points)
12. What is Spock's serial number? (Also from CM) (8 points)
13. Kirk "knows all about" Feris' authority in THE GALILEO SEVEN. What reference
tells us all about it? (5 points)
14. What quadrant does the shuttlecraft Columbus search in GALILEO SEVEN? (5
points)

15. Where does Spock locate the creatures in ARENA? (4 points)
16. Give the coordinates for the position of the Enterprise, as well as that of the solar system in ARENA. (4 points)
17. What's the serial number of Captain Christopher's plane in TOMORROW IS YESTERDAY? (8 points)
18. All right, what's the serial number on the plane in the teaser for TIY? (8 more)
19. Work this out carefully: how many men were on the Botany Bay in SPACE SEED? (3 points)
20. Where is the Enterprise heading in SPACE SEED? (4 points) Bonus: What is the significance of that destination? (2 points)

SCORING: 0-50 points. It's expected. After all this is an extremely difficult quiz. Just keep your eyes and ears open wider next time.

51-75 points: Not bad at all. You certainly know your Trekvia. Pat yourself on the back; take a Vulcan to lunch, kiss a horta; celebrate!

76-90 points: Very good. Your know your Star Trek like Chekov knows Russia—well, almost.

91-110 points: Fantastic! This is the true mark of a Treksper. You could give Mr. Spock a run for his money — if he ever used any.

Over 110 points: A score over 110 points shows you have capabilities far beyond the range of mortal humans. It shows that you possess extraordinary insight. And it shows that you know Trek better than most anyone else. But mostly, it shows you can't add right, because the scores only go up to 110!

ANSWERS TO THE WORLD'S HARDEST TREKWIZ I

1. McCoy says he's examined nine men, aged 23-59, including Sandoval.
2. They build a subsonic transmitter.
3. Unit XV 75-847 reports the bad news.
4. They employ Special Occupation Order #4 (wonder why the other three failed!).
5. The map, if you spot it quickly enough, displays section 2-6.
6. The comet is Cairus (K'EXerus, rhymes with Iris) 4; bonus = magnitude 7.
7. Lt. Helen Johansen (it seems that Kirk doesn't have too much luck with Helen's).
8. 63.3 (63 what's?). It's just enough to get back.
9. Take any of these: pergium, uranium, platinum, gold, and rare earths; bonus points: two each additional except "rare earths", which is, after all, a generality.
10. The other security heads are Lewis and Mincey.
11. He greets Timothy, whom he hasn't seen since the Vulcanian expedition, plus Mike, Arden, and Keller. The last two names are garbled, so give yourself the full six points for any 3 — but no bonus! I planned this mathematically too well.
12. S179-276SP.
13. He is asked to remind himself to become familiar with Book 19, Section 433, Paragraph 12. (Isn't that a bit much to recall on the spur of the moment?)
14. It searches quadrant 779X by 354M.
15. 1570 yards away, Azimuth 93° (211).
16. The Enterprise is at 2479PM; the system at 2466PM.
17. Serial number 70916/FG-926.
18. THAT number is 70914/FG-914.
19. Several answers — if he 12 units that malfunctioned were all men, then there were only 54 left. If you decided to forget those lost soles, 42 is correct.
20. They're going to Starbase 12; bonus: it's their command base in this sector, in the Gamma 400 system (2 pts. for each half).

WORLD'S HARDEST TREKWIZ II
(Based On Second-Season Episodes Only)

1. In METAMORPHOSIS, Kirk, Spock, McCoy and Nancy Hedford pass a certain something BEFORE they get drawn off course by the "cloud." What is it?
2. Name the seven android series in I, MUDD.
- 2a. Name the Alice numbers we meet.
3. In the DOOMSDAY MACHINE, Kirk orders Washburn to try something to get the viewing screen working. What does Washburn try?
4. What elements are the rocks on Gamma Trianguli 6?
5. A member of the science team in THE CHANGLING has a special transmitter. Who is it?
6. What two creatures does Spock say have a mating drive similar to pon farr?
7. What system does Apollo inhabit?
8. Kirk reads about cars in a magazine in BREAD AND CIRCUSES. What is the name of the car, in what magazine does he read about it, and what other ads catch his eye?
9. Kirk-2 (MIRROR-MIRROR) bombards Spock-1 with questions in the brief time we see him. What are those five questions?
10. Gary Seven shows Roberta Lincoln one of three "artificial" IDs. What is it, who signs it, and what are the other two ID's.

ANSWERS TO WORLD'S HARDEST TREKWIZ II

1. They pass Projecting Point 3.
2. Alice, Annabelle, Barbara, Herman, Maise, Oscar, and Trudy. Norman is one, and one is not a series. We see Alices 2, 27, 118, 210, 322, and 471. Bonus
3. He tries the 266 circuit. It helps.
4. Uraninite, hornblende and quartz.
5. Dr. Marway.
6. Earth's salmon and the eelbirds of Regulus V.
7. The Beta Geminiurum system.
8. He reads about Jupiter 8 cars (or, an "internal combustion engine," according to Spock), along with ads for Mars toothpaste and Neptune bath salts, in the magazine, The Gallian.
9. The five questions are:
 a) Has the whole galaxy gone crazy?
 b) What kind of uniform is this?
 c) Where's your beard?
 d) What is going on?
 e) Where's my personal guard?
 10. He shows her the CIA card, signed by Albert Hobson, along with one from the National Security Agency and from the New York Policy Department which he uses later.

THE WORLD'S EASIEST TREKWIZ I

1. What's the name of the planet on which we find Miri?
2. What's the name of Sulu's drill thrall?
3. In what episode does an old man cry, "For the world is hollow and I have touched the sky"?
4. How many times (ALL centuries) did the Enterprise land on Earth?
5. How many fatalities does the Enterprise crew (NOT including Klingons) suffer in DAY OF THE DOVE?

6. In THE CHANGLING, Spock notes the first attack drained 20% of the ship's power. How many more attacks can it withstand?
7. What are the Halkans called in the Mirror universe?
8. In OMEGA GLORY, the Exeter landing bay is searched. How many shuttlecraft are MISSING?
9. In RETURN TO TOMORROW, which "superbeing" possesses McCoy?
10. And finally, what is the fourth planet in the Star System 892 called?

ANSWERS TO THE WORLD'S EASIEST TREKWIZ I

1. Miri's Planet
2. He didn't have one — Sulu wasn't even on the planet!
3. Oh, come ON, now!
4. None; it never landed anywhere
5. None
6. 41
7. Halkans, of course!
8. None
9. None
10. Planet 892-IV

THE WORLD'S EASIEST TREKWIZ II (Based on First Season Episodes)

1. To whom does Kirk say, "Don't you like birds, Mr. Rodriguez?"
2. To whom does McCoy refer when he says, "Jim, your brother Sam, his family—are they stationed on this planet?"
3. Who wrote a document that ended, "Signed, Kodos, Governor of Tarsus IV?"
4. What was Lazarus' "monstrous, murderous thing" called?
5. What was the title character in CHARLIE X?
6. In WHERE NO MAN HAS GONE BEFORE, who was in charge of Engineering?
7. Who injects/poisons McCoy in CITY ON THE EDGE OF FOREVER?
8. What song does Riley sing in NAKED TIME that includes the line, "I'll take you home again, Kathleen?"
9. What does McCoy say about Korby at the end of WHAT ARE LITTLE GIRLS MADE OF?
10. And, finally, where was Ben Finney killed?

ANSWERS TO THE WORLD'S EASIEST TREKWIZ II

1. Should be obvious to even the lowly Denebian Slime Devil.
2. Should be obvious to even the lowly Denebian Slime Devil.
3. Should be obvious to even the lowly Denebian Slime Devil.
4. Lazarus, or more specifically, Lazarus B.
5. Charlie Evans, but for this quiz, full marks for "Charlie".
6. Scotty (who else).
7. McCoy.
8. "I'll Take You Home Again, Kathleen".
9. Nothing—McCoy doesn't appear in this episode!
10. Ben Finney, as far as we know, is alive and well and living in Sam Cogley's appeals house: he never was killed!





Personal Pleasures

by

Deborah Goby

"Jim! Down here!"

At the head of the winding stairs, Jim Kirk squinted down across the smoky, dimly-lit nightclub, trying to pinpoint McCoy's voice. Finally he spotted the doctor's windmilling arms, right at the edge of the dance floor. He made his way down the steps and between the crowded, closely packed tables to where McCoy, Scott, and Chekov had kept a chair for him.

"You got here just in time. The last show's just about to start. Wait until you see this girl; I've never seen a woman who could move like she can. Here, sit down and order a drink." McCoy pulled him down into the chair and signalled a waiter.

"She must be good for you to be this excited, Bones." Kirk grinned.

"Aye, Captain, that she is," Scott answered him, "and her costume, a miracle o' engineerin'. I don't know who she keeps from fallin' out o' it."

"Better than the twins in that canteen on Rigel Four?" Kirk raised a skeptical eyebrow.

McCoy took a swallow of his drink, then snorted derisively, "Compared to her, they were rank amateurs."

The captain received his drink from the waiter and turned to Chekov. "Have you seen this charmer?"

"No, Keptin, I have not," Chekov grinned, "but I've sairtinly heard a lot about her lately. I'm really looking forward to seeing her dance."

The already dim lights went even dimmer and a spotlight centered on the bare dance floor, highlighting the announcer, who wore a formal black suit. He swept the audience a bow, "Ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to the Al Adabi. It is our pleasure to present to you tonight, Sheera, a dancer who has no equal, in her final performance. If I may have some quiet, please." He waited for the room to settle down, then, with another low bow, announced in a stentorian voice, "Sheera!"

The spotlight went out and, off to the right, the delicate tinkle of finger cymbals set an insistent, exotic rhythm. The spotlight focused on a pair of slender hands and sparkled off the flashing zils on the dancer's fingers and the glittering gold bracelets around her wrists. Slowly it expanded to show that the hands and arms were raised in a graceful arch above a barbarically beautiful face, artfully made up to accent the dark, exotic, slanted eyes and full red mouth. A ruby-like gem hung in the middle of her forehead, suspended from her hair by slender gold chains. Heavy golden earrings hung almost to her shoulders, mingling with her waist-length black curls. The spotlight continued expanding until it revealed the dancer entirely. She balanced her weight on one leg, her body leaning backwards, the other leg extended forward, knee bent, toes pointed and touching the floor.

Scotty nudged Kirk, "See what I meant about engineerin'?" he whispered.

Her tiny jeweled top barely contained her full breasts, and a necklace of gold coins disappeared into her abundantly displayed cleavage. A belly drape of more golden coins and bells depended from the skimpy, glittery top and hung almost to her navel where a brilliant red jewel, a match to the one on her forehead, sparkled and shone. Her heavy, bell-trimmed coin belt and flame-colored, glitter-trimmed skirt, slit impossibly high on both sides, hung so low on her hips that it seemed that any movement would cause both to fall.

The musicians began an eerie melody and she danced forward in a slowly sinuous snakewalk, punctuated with belly rolls and pelvic thrusts. She circled the floor, close to the tables, turning and swaying, her jewelry tinkling a counterpoint to the rhythm of her zils. The musicians picked up the rhythm and she swirled around the floor again, turning and dipping, her hips swinging alluringly, her skirts bellling out to show perfectly formed legs. When the drummer began a pounding, driving solo, she was right in front of the Enterprise party's table. Her shimmy routine, beginning with subtle hip movements and progressing until her whole torso seemed to vibrate, nearly caused Chekov to fall out of his chair. She saw that his eyes were fastened on her breasts, and sank to her knees in front of him, leaning forward into a shoulder shimmy that caused him to blush a fiery red. Then she threw him a wink and a saucy smile, rose to her feet with a seductive wiggle, and danced away.

The performance lasted some thirty minutes, then, as she spun rapidly, her skirts swirling around her, the music crashed to a resounding climax. She dropped to her knees, her body arched gracefully backwards, one arm supporting her weight, the other flung over her proudly lifted head. The audience went wild.

"Well, what do you think?" McCoy yelled in Kirk's ear over the storm of applause.

"You weren't kidding," the captain yelled back, "I'd like to meet her. She's one of the most gorgeous women I've ever seen."

"That was a foregone conclusion," McCoy replied dryly.

After the applause had finally died away and the waiters had collected the coins and flowers that had been flung on to the dance floor, Jim ordered another round of drinks. When the waiter returned with the tray, Jim paid for the drinks and said to him, "Please convey my compliments to Miss Sheera and tell her that Captain James T. Kirk of the Enterprise would be honored if she would join him and his party."

"Well, sir," the boy answered doubtfully, "she doesn't usually do that."

"You could at least ask, couldn't you?" the captain said with a winning smile, pressing a coin into his hand.

"Oh, yes, sir, I can ask," the waiter replied cheerfully and went off across the dance floor.

Behind the floor, he crossed a hallway to knock on a closed door. "Sheera?" he called.

The door opened, "Yes, Tonio?"

"I think you've made another conquest, cousin, a starship captain, no less!"

"Come on, you know I don't party with the patrons," she replied wryly. "I'm a dancer, not a whore."

"Well, he said I could at least ask you and he gave me this," the boy showed her the coin. "He conveyed his compliments very politely and said he was Captain Kirk of the Enterprise."

"The Enterprise!" A startled look widened Sheera's dark eyes, "Well, maybe I'll make an exception this time. After all, it was my last performance."

"It was one of your best," he grinned at her. "We're really going to miss you, Sheera."

"Oh, Tonio, you know I'll be back for visits," she ruffled his dark curls affectionately. "Besides, your sister is almost as good a dancer now. I've really been working with Dalena. I don't think your business will suffer just because I'm not here to dance any more. Come give me a hug, in case I don't see you tomorrow to say good-by."

* * * * *

"Do you think she'll come?" Chekov asked, almost bouncing on his chair with excitement.

"Well, I certainly hope so," Jim smiled at him, "but I hope to contain my excitement a little better than you seem to be doing."

"If she does," McCoy announced, "I'm going to give you a run for your money, Jim. We'll see if my southern charm is more effective than your personable smile."

"Bones, you wouldn't!" Kirk looked shocked.

"Don't play innocent with me, Captain. I know what you've got in mind." The doctor cocked an eyebrow at Scott. "What about you, Scotty? Want to give us both some competition?"

"Aye, that I will," the engineer replied stoutly. "I might surprise all o' you. We mysterious Scots know how to be verra' charmin'."

Sheera's entrance put an end to their friendly bantering and they watched appreciatively as she made her way to their table, stopping now and then to speak to some of the other customers.

"Thank you for your kind invitation, gentlemen," her voice had a musical intonation and her smile would have melted harder hearts than those of the men seated at the table.

All four of them jumped up to offer her a chair and, when the laughing confusion sorted itself out, Sheera was seated between Kirk and McCoy, facing Chekov.

"Would you care for a drink?" the doctor asked solicitously. "You must be thirsty."

"Why, yes, that would be very nice, and perhaps you would introduce everyone?"

"Of course. I'm Dr. Leonard McCoy, that's Captain Jim Kirk on your right, Engineer Montgomery Scott next to him and Ensign Pavel Chekov across from you."

"Let's not be so formal," Jim protested with an easy smile. He looked at Sheera, the smile lighting his eyes, "You can call us Bones, Jim, Scotty, and Pavel."

"Well, Jim, this certainly isn't a formal occasion," she laughed, a glint in her eyes. "You can call me Sheera."

After a flurry of "Glad to meet you's", and Sheera's drink had been ordered and delivered, the group soon acquired a party atmosphere. Kirk was conscious of envious glances from nearby tables and exchanged gloating smiles with McCoy. Soon it was obvious that Chekov was once again enthralled with Sheera's cleavage and she leaned across the table to pat his cheek. "I'm sorry to disillusion you, Pavel, but it's really mostly padding," she said apologetically.

Chekov blushed to his bangs while the others enjoyed a laugh at his expense. Sheera reached for his hand and said with an understanding smile, "I'm sorry, I just couldn't resist. You were so bemused. Please let me make up for my little joke. I'll buy you a drink, the house special. I guarantee you'll like it." She included

all the men in her smile, "I'll buy the next round. You can't leave without trying the drink that made the Al Adabi famous."

"But you're our guest," Jim protested.

"Let's just say it's my way of thanking you for your entertaining company. You can't refuse me that, can you, Jim?" The impish look in her dark eyes completely contradicted the appealing tone of her voice, and the captain was aware that he was very attracted to this fascinating young woman.

"I couldn't refuse a woman as beautiful as you are anything," he replied gallantly.

Sheera turned and beckoned to a waiter. "Hassim's Delight for all of us, Tonio. Put it on my ticket."

"You, too?" the boy asked.

"Yes, me, too. I'm entitled to celebrate the end of one career and the beginning of another."

"The end of a career?" Jim was genuinely interested. "Do you mean that you aren't going to dance any more? That would be a shame."

"Well, not professionally," Sheera answered seriously. "Dancing paid my way through school, but I graduated a month ago, leading my class, I might add, and tomorrow I start my real job."

"And what would that be?" McCoy asked.

"I trained as a lab technologist, specializing in non-human cytology."

McCoy's eyebrows climbed, "That's very impressive for someone as young as you are, Sheera. It's a very demanding field of study."

"But very interesting, Bones. Oh, here are our drinks." She turned the subject adroitly. "I hope you like Hassim's Delight, gentlemen. It's everything its name implies."

The drink was indeed everything its name implied and, after a second round, Chekov was definitely the worse for wear. McCoy, obedient to a silent message from Kirk, decided to take the inebriated ensign back to the ship and detailed a protesting Scott to help him. "Come on, Scotty, you remember what he did last shore leave." The doctor was standing now, and cast a meaningful glance at Jim over Sheera's head.

"Aye, I remember," Scott caught the non-verbal message. "I was the one who had to bail him out. Besides, we can come back after we put him to bed. I know another place where the entertainment is verra entertainin' and I think you should see it."

"I think I should, too," McCoy came around the table and pulled Chekov to his feet. "Take his other arm, Scotty, I don't think he can walk. Come on, Pavel, it's time to go home." He looked pointedly at Kirk, "We'll see you in the morning."

"And what was that about?" Sheera asked Jim archly, when the trio had carefully navigated to the stairs. "Do I scent an intrigue?"

"Let's just say a gentlemen's agreement," he answered evasively.

"Captain, did you pull rank?" she asked with a teasing look.

"No, not really," he gave her a frank smile, "we just agreed that I needed your company more than they did. Do you mind?"

She gave him a considering look, then said, "No, I don't think I do."

"Good," Jim smiled broadly, "what do you say to having dinner with me? I understand that there's a great restaurant not too far from here."

"That would be nice. Why don't you wait here while I change? I can't go out in this costume."

Jim gave her an appreciative look, "Not unless you want to be the center of a riot."

Sheera laughed and squeezed his hand, "No, I don't want that. It'll take me about fifteen minutes. Shall I send Tonio to you with another drink?"

"No, thanks, I'm fine."

She returned to him wearing a clinging red jumpsuit that revealed a slender figure, not quite as voluptuous as the belly dancer's costume had made it seem, but very well put together. Jim stood up and offered his arm, "Shall we go?"

They left the nightclub and hailed a robot cab. Once he had given the cab their destination, he turned to put his arm around her. "I've been wanting to do this ever since I first saw you. I hope you don't object, because I'm going to kiss you." He lifted her chin with his other hand and bent to the warm softness of her red lips. Her arms went around his neck and she returned his kiss tenderly.

"No, I don't object," she whispered, her lips moving against his ear, her fingers stroking the back of his neck. He kissed her again, holding her tightly. This kiss went on and on, until his passion and her tenderness deepened into warm urgency. They were so totally involved on the taste and feel of each other that the cab had stopped and twice announced that they were at their destination before they were aware of their surroundings. He reluctantly released her and, in silence, they got out and started towards the entrance of the restaurant. Under the yellow glow of a streetlight, Jim halted and turned to face her, holding both of her hands in his. "Sheera, you are a beautiful, intelligent woman and I would like to know you better, a lot better. I think that this evening doesn't have to end with a dinner, does it?" He waited for her answer, momentarily puzzled by the considering look he saw in her eyes. When her answer seemed a little long in coming, he wondered if she were regretting her response to his kisses in the cab and asked, "Is something wrong? Have I presumed more than I should have?"

Her eyes cleared and she laughed softly, intimately, "No, Jim, nothing's wrong. If you would like, I know a lovely place we can go to, after dinner."

* * * * *

"Captain Kirk," the intercom announced, "this is Lieutenant Ramirez in Personnel. The new crew complement is aboard and will be assembled in the main Rec Hall in five minutes."

"Very good," he answered, "I'll be right down. Have you notified Dr. McCoy and Mr. Scott?"

"Yes, sir, they're on the way."

"All right, Lieutenant, I'm coming." He turned the command chair to face the science station. "Mr. Spock, you have the con. Please continued with the systems' checkout."

"Very good, Captain," the tall Vulcan came forward to assume the command chair as the captain started for the turbolift.

"I shouldn't be too long. These 'Welcome Aboard' speeches don't take much time," he called as the lift doors swished shut.

McCoy was waiting for him at the lift doors on the Rec level. "Well, Jim, did you have a pleasant evening?" he asked.

"Very pleasant, Bones," he answered with a reminiscent smile as they walked down the corridor.

"I thought so, considering you didn't get back 'til early this morning. You look like the cat that got into the cream."

The captain's smile broadened into a grin, "Don't ask questions, Doctor. A gentlemen doesn't kiss and tell. And how do you know what time I got in?"

McCoy looked sheepish, "Because I came aboard just after you did and the ensign at the transporter station said I'd just missed you."

Kirk laughed, "Sowing a few wild oats yourself?"

"Like you said, don't ask questions," the doctor retorted, wearing an answering grin.

Mr. Scott was waiting at the Rec room door, along with the Personnel officer. "Good morning, gentlemen. Mr. Ramirez tells me we've got a good-lookin' bunch of people."

"That's right, sir," the lieutenant said, taking some papers out of his notebook. "You'll be pleased, Dr. McCoy. You got both the lab technicians you asked for and another nurse." He handed the papers to Kirk and McCoy. "Here are your copies of the crew list."

The two men scanned the lists as the lieutenant continued. "They're all well-qualified in their fields and most of them have transferred here from other ships. The rest of them are fresh from the Academy, but they've all had their shakedown cruises and passed with flying colors. Top five percent of their classes, as a matter of fact. We're going out with a full complement this time, and no raw recruits."

"Jim, look at this," McCoy nudged the captain, then point to an entry which read, "Adabi, Ens. S. Al, lab tech, cyto spec". He looked at Kirk, one eyebrow raised, "you don't suppose...."

"Damn," the captain said, frowning, "I hope not. That's not a good way to begin a duty tour, on either side."

"I couldn't have said it better," McCoy replied feelingly. "Well, maybe it's a coincidence," he shrugged.

"I hope so, Bones. When I think of the problems we may run into if it isn't...." Kirk looked dismayed.

"We'll only find out by going in there," McCoy said dryly, opening the door.

The twenty-three men and women standing near the door came to attention as the officers filed in. Kirk scanned the group quickly, but they were bunched together and he couldn't see everyone clearly. Lieutenant Ramirez told the new crewmembers to be at ease, then introduced the officers and announced that the captain would speak first.

Jim stepped forward, glancing from face to face. "I'd like to welcome you aboard the Enterprise. I know I'm not the first to do so, but I am the Captain and my welcome is the official one." He smiled and they smiled back, the tension in the room natural to people in a new situation, lessening. "We have a good crew and I like a happy ship, so I'm sure you'll all have no problems fitting in." He saw that the brunette in the back was indeed Sheera and that she was watching him intently. He looked away from her and continued, "You'll have today to get settled in your quarters and familiarize yourselves with the ship. I believe Lieutenant Ramirez will be conducting a tour later this afternoon," he looked at the personnel officer, who nodded. "You have all been assigned to share quarters with an experienced crewman, which should help you get acquainted with the way we run things. I think you will find that the routine on this ship is a little different from what you knew on your last assignment or, for those of you on a first assignment, from your training flights. Every captain has his own way of doing things. If you have any questions, feel free to talk to Lieutenant Ramirez, or to your immediate superior, whomever that happens to be. I hope you all enjoy your duty on the Enterprise, and once again, welcome aboard." He stepped back, beckoning to McCoy, who followed him out the door and into the corridor. "Did you see her?"

"Yes, I saw her. She was watching you pretty closely, Jim. You're going to have to talk to her," he said seriously. "Yes, I know it, and the sooner, the better," the captain thought for a second. "They're all getting their physicals today, aren't they?"

"Yes."

"Put her at the top of the list. Call me just before you finish, then send her to the small briefing room. "I'll meet her there."

"All right."

* * * * *

"You wished to see me, Captain?" Her pleasant, musical voice drew his attention from his clasped hands on top of the table. She looked different, in the trim blue uniform, with her cascade of dusty curls in a neat coil on the back of her head.

"Yes, Ensign, I did," he answered getting up from his chair. "Won't you sit down?"

She took the chair he indicated, studying him with clear, candid eyes.

"Ensign Adabi," he began decisively.

"Excuse me, sir, but if you wish to name me correctly, it's Al Adabi," she interrupted him with an apologetic smile.

"Pardon me, Ensign, I wasn't aware," he answered her, annoyance creeping into his voice at being distracted from his train of thought.

"That's quite all right, Captain. It happens all the time, most people don't really know how to say names of Middle Eastern origin." She waited a few seconds for him to continue, then prompted him, "You had something to say to me?"

He took a hasty step forward. "What happened last night...." he paused to collect his thoughts, "wouldn't have happened if I had known that you were coming aboard my ship this morning as a member of the crew."

"I know that," she answered calmly.

"I do not make a habit of taking mistresses from among my crew," he stated crisply. "It's bad for morale and I feel that it's unethical."

"I know that, too."

"The gossip and jealousy such an affair can cause have been the ruin of more than one ship and it is NOT going to happen on the Enterprise." He spoke emphatically, almost as if he were convincing himself, as well as her.

"I wouldn't want it to," she smiled at him. "Captain, won't you please relax and sit down? I am not going to cause you any trouble whatsoever."

He looked searchingly at her, then abruptly sat down. She placed her hands on the tabletop, turning the ornate ring she wore on her index finger around and around, watching its facets flash in the light. She looked up at him calmly, "Captain, I don't expect any special treatment because of what happened last night. I'm not some starry-eyed virgin ready to fall in love with the first handsome starship captain who pays attention to her. I was attracted to you as a person, not as a powerful man; you were attracted to me, so I decided to let whatever was going to happen, happen. It was my decision and, if it was wrong, I apologize."

Kirk frowned at her, "Don't you think, Ensign, under the circumstances, it should have been my decision, too?"

Sheera dropped her eyes once again to the ring on her finger, "Well, yes, it should have been." She paused, then looked up at him, a veiled challenge in her eyes. "I decided to take the risk." Her lips were set in a stubborn line. "You, of all people, should understand that."

Jim smothered an understanding smile. Yes, he, of all people, certainly did understand, but that still didn't excuse the potentially troublesome situation she had created. And yet, he told himself, looking at her dark, exotic eyes and inviting red lips, now closed in an uncompromising line, he had been just as much to blame. He permitted himself a small smile. "It's no use crying over spilled milk. What's done is done and I see no use in indulging ourselves in recriminations. I think the question now is, what happens next?"

"What happens next?" Sheera looked puzzled, "I've already said that I expect no special treatment."

It was Jim's turn to look down at fidgeting hands. "That's not what I mean..." he began slowly, glancing at her.

"Oh, I see," her brow cleared, "you want to know if I'm going to talk about it. Jim, what happened between us last night was a personal, private pleasure that I have no intention of discussing with anyone. It is my own delicious, little secret to amuse myself with when I'm bored or depressed, and it would lose its magic if I shared it with anyone." The warmth of her smile was in her eyes, too. "Do you understand?"

He smiled back at her, "Yes, I think I do."

"What about you," she asked, "and your friends? Can I count on their discretion and yours?" She smiled even wider at the startled look on his face, "After all, Jim, I have the right to ask of you the same thing you asked of me."

He grinned ruefully, "Yes, Sheera, you do. You have my word that I will be as discreet as you are. And you don't have to worry about McCoy or Scott. They won't

even bring it up, now that they both know you're a member of the crew. As for Chekov, I think he was too drunk to notice anything."

Sheera laughed, "I think so,, too. I doubt if he'll even recognize me."

The captain leaned back in his chair, clasping his hands behind his head. "I'm glad that's settled, but I want to know one thing. What were you doing dancing in that bar?"

"Bar! How dare you insult the most famous and oldest nightclub in all Bizinia!" she cried, mock indignation glinting in her eyes. "My Uncle Hassim owns the Al Adabi. My parents died when I was only three, of Myphorean fever. My uncle and aunt adopted me and raised me as their own daughter. Aunt Ayesha taught me to dance, just as she taught all of her own daughters. We've all danced in the club; it's a tradition. All of the daughters of the house dance and all of the sons take their turns as waiters and bartenders. Uncle Hassim is very proud that he has never had to hire outside help. And I really did pay my way through school with what I earned as a dancer. You'd be surprised what a good dancer can make in tips," she threw him a mischievous look, "especially when a Starfleet ship is in port."

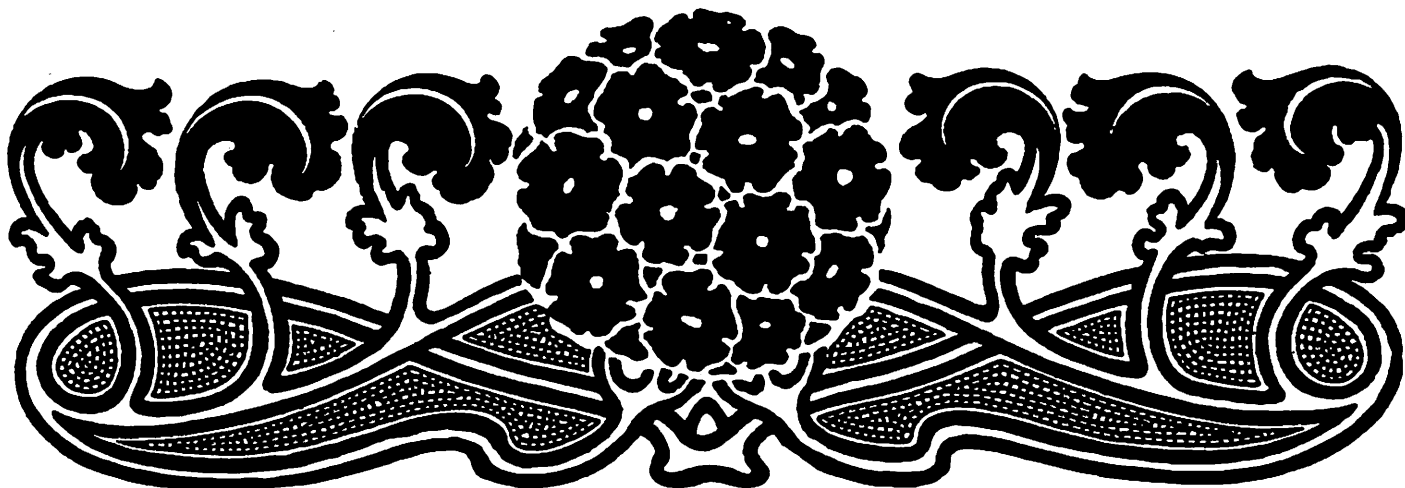
"Oh, no, I wouldn't," Jim retorted. "I've spent my share of money in places like the Al Adabi, and bailed out some of my junior officers, after they'd spent more than their share." He stood up, indicating that the interview was over, "Well, Ensign, I think it's time to resume a more formal relationship. It's a shame, though, that you aren't going to dance any more."

"Oh, I didn't say that, Captain, I only said that I wasn't going to dance professionally. I have no objection to performing at private parties, or for my friends. As a matter of fact, I've already promised Christine Chapel that I would dance at Dr. McCoy's birthday party next week." She started towards the door, then paused to throw a wicked, little smile over her shoulder, "and the costume I'm planning for that occasion is much better than the one you saw me in."

The captain laughed, "My God, I hope Bones can stand it."

As the door shut behind her, he hoped he could.

In the corridor, Sheera laughed softly to herself, then walked away.



The Evil That Men Do

by Isabell Klein

Mission record of Klingon Confederacy Battlecruiser Devisor, Koloth commanding, on course for neutral zone with the Imperial Federation. We have been ordered to investigate rumors of a new weapon of unknown design in the arsenal of the Empire reported to be aboard the ISS Enterprise. I have summoned my senior staff to discuss possible methods of securing definite knowledge of this device, if it does indeed exist.

The main conference room aboard the Devisor was too small for all the ship's senior officers to sit around the table. The less senior, therefore, ranged along the walls — some seated, others leaning easily against the bulkhead. All present were intent on the words of their commander.

"It will not be easy to secure the information we require," Koloth was saying, "especially if what we seek is aboard the Enterprise. Kirk will trust few with knowledge such as this. He is an able commander, and a cunning and dangerous man. No one can rise as fast as he has through the Imperial ranks without an inordinate amount of self-preservation combined with an equal amount of viciousness. Kirk has those qualities and more."

"Klingons are not without qualities of their own," Korax, the first officer, asserted. "If it were not for the Organians—"

"The Organians have their own reasons for imposing peace on the galaxy," Koloth pointed out, "and one day, they doubtless will inform us what their wishes are as to the Klingon Confederacy. Until that time, we must abide by their rules — much though it limits our freedom to strike at the Earthers, but that does not stifle our actions completely."

"Just how are we going to get our hands on this new weapon?" asked Korvin, Chief Engineer and a master of the obvious. "Violating Empire space has always been a deadly proposition."

"True, the Earthers do not take prisoners, but this time we may have some help," Koloth informed them. "The data on this new weapon came to the Confederation through, shall we say 'unusual' channels. If these channels remain open to us, we may well be successful."

"And if they don't?" Korax prompted.

"Then we shall die for the glory of the Confederacy!"

Kalen, the principal scientist on board, said little during the opening discussions, but now asked, "And if we do succeed in capturing this new weapon — then what? Developing a defense might not be as easy as you seem to anticipate. With something so new, even the Empire may not have a defense."

"What makes you say that?" Koloth demanded.

Kalen sat back in his chair, his hands characteristically clasped in front of him on the table. He always reminded his commander of a teacher about to give a lecture, which Kalen often did. He had connections within High Command that Koloth envied, and often knew as much or more about the ship's mission as Koloth did himself. Kalen did not share such information unless it suited his purposes; this apparently was one of those times.

"It is rumored," Kalen began, "that the weapon is not of Imperial design but rather plunder from a conquered world, and that the secret of its existence as well as its design is known to only a few. How it works is unclear — probably some kind of transporter effect. The target, framed in a viewscreen, merely disappears. Totally — as if into another dimension. A most efficient way to rid oneself of one's enemies. The Confederacy could use such a weapon to its own ends, were we to possess one."

"Kalen, just how do you know so much about this weapon?" Koloth challenged, needling the scientist. It wouldn't hurt for Kalen to know that his commander suspected him of having contact with the hated Earthers.

"I diligently pursue my scientific studies, even to the extent of translating stolen Imperial scientific reports," Kalen replied haughtily, effectively contradicting himself. Secret weapons known to only a few are not topics of scientific reports.

"I can see I shall have to enlarge my reading list," Koloth commented coldly. "We will talk of this privately, Kalen. For the rest of you, we must assume that this weapon is on board the Enterprise and that we shall have to board her to capture it. I want your recommendations before the end of the sixth rotation. You are dismissed."

Those about the room came to attention, clicked their heels together, and filed out.

"Korax," Koloth called to his second in command, "remain."

"Yes, Commander!"

"We have much to discuss."

Koloth waited until the room cleared, then motioned to Korax, who conducted a quick sensor sweep for listening devices.

"The old ways die slowly, Commander, and for some, they never die."

"Remember that and trust no one, as in the past. We again become like the Earthers, constantly watching our backs to see who is about to stick the knife in. Were I to choose, I would not live this way, but personal choice has little meaning when circumstances dictate otherwise. Now, let us discuss this problem. I do not trust Kalen in these matters. Were another scientist available, I would have transferred him as far from this ship as possible." Koloth paused for a moment, his finger drawing small circles on the table, a nervous habit he had tried to break without success. "It is to our advantage, however, that I have information that he does not possess. There has been contact from within Starfleet which, if it is to be trusted, is to our extreme advantage. It may signal the beginnings of a shift in the balance of power in the Empire and provide us with the opportunity to make inroads."

"But why should any member of Starfleet wish to make an alliance with us? Such a move could only lead to eventual discovery and death. And, how do we know we can trust this contact?"

"There are no guarantees and it would be foolish to trust one who would betray his own people. Perhaps, though, this one seeks to combat the tyranny of the Empire."

"And, perhaps he's only after money, always presuming it's a he. There is an ancient proverb on many worlds about female deadliness and those who would scorn her."

Koloth nodded. "The Earthers allow their women great latitude of action," he agreed. "Although I doubt even they would use a woman in this situation. We rendezvous with our contact at the edge of the zone between us and the Empire. Dangerous space. Empire ships have been known to attack without warning, even on our side if they think they can score an easy kill. I want the ship cloaked and on battle alert as we approach the zone."

"Surely the Organians—" Korax began.

"The Organians play their own games with us and the Earthers as pawns."

"Recent reports indicate the Earthers can detect our ships even when cloaked," Korax pointed out.

"So say the reports, but we do not have absolute proof — and if the reports are true, we can at least let them work a little harder to find us. Nevertheless, alert the bridge crew of the possibility that we can be discovered when cloaked and maintain maximum alertness while we are in the area."

"And," Korax said as he rose from his chair, "am I to know who it is we are to meet?"

Koloth walked toward the door. "You will learn the identity of our contact as I do. Not even the High Command knows whom we seek. And, before you ask, I do not know how this contact is to be made, only that it will be."

On board the Imperial Star Ship Enterprise, her captain lounged at his desk, slowly tapping the tip of a stylus against the palm of his hand. On the wall behind his desk was mounted the pierced Earth emblem of the Empire. Before him stood his first officer, Spock's beard adding to the reassurance that this James T. Kirk was indeed on his own Enterprise.

"I tell you, Spock, it was unreal. Everything was almost the same — changes of style rather than form. And, the crew — they are soft. Why, we could take over their Federation like that," Kirk said, snapping the stylus between his fingers. "They are that weak!"

"Yet, from what you tell me, they detected the difference and moved swiftly to incarcerate you and the rest of the landing party until such time as the transfer could be effected."

Kirk eyed Spock warily. "True, but it was your counterpart who discovered the difference as you did here." Kirk's eyes hardened as he asked softly. "Tell me again, what was he like?"

"This conversation is pointless, Captain. I have given you my impressions of the 'others' both verbally and in my log entries. I have nothing to add after all this time."

"Don't give me that," Kirk snapped, his voice rising with each word. "You preferred him to me, didn't you?"

"As I have said, I found him interesting, much as I find a laboratory specimen interesting. But, if he were here and you there, I doubt this Enterprise would have experienced the success she has under your command, and I for one, would sorely miss the profits."

Kirk laughed out loud, his humor restored. "I'll just bet you would."

"Furthermore," Spock continued, "I would estimate the odds of his ever becoming captain of this vessel as—"

"I don't need your odds," Kirk said as he relaxed again in his chair. "He could not have succeeded here and I — I could not have succeeded there. An interesting paradox, don't you agree? Two identical beings and each would be a failure in the other's universe. Still, it's almost impossible to believe that that universe actually exists. I can accept it intellectually, but even having been there, seen it, seen its weaknesses — it's still hard to grasp."

"And, having met your opposite number and the members of his crew, I can understand your difficulty."

The two officers were silent for a moment, remembering. Then Spock said, "I trust, Captain, that you did not order me here to discuss parallel universes."

Kirk picked up a computer disk, casually tossed it up in the air several times. "These latest orders from Star Fleet Command — what do you make of them?"

"The captain is aware that I do not have access to his command codes," Spock replied stiffly.

"Of course," Kirk said easily with the merest hint of a smile. He slipped the disk into his desk viewer, keyed in the proper sequence, and the face of Commodore Mendez appeared on the screen. The commodore, Kirk thought as he had the first time he viewed the tape, was looking decidedly ill. Perhaps there would soon be a vacancy at Command. And, perhaps it was time to make his own move.

"Starfleet Command has acquired information of a possible Klingon intrusion into Imperial space. However, we have not been able to verify these reports or even learn their source. You are hereby ordered to proceed to the border area between the Empire and the Klingon Confederacy and there to make contact, by whatever means possible, with members of the Klingon fleet known to be patrolling that area, and to ascertain the accuracy of this information. Starfleet out."

The small figure on the screen waited for the appropriate amount of time to pass and then returned the salute that had never been given.

"Well?" Kirk asked as the screen went dark, and when Spock remained silent, added, "No comments?"

"The commodore does not appear well. Beyond that, several, Captain, but none that clarify the present situation. However, it is unlike Imperial Command to chase mirages."

"My thoughts, exactly. They must have something more than just rumors, and they want us to be the one's to stick our necks out."

"Do you think this is an attempt on Command's part to remove you as captain?" Spock asked.

The same question had been in Kirk's mind, but after some thought, he shook his head. "Not at the price of the Enterprise. They may wish to discredit me, but I think they would prefer the ship intact. They have agents on board, of course, who might try something. Sulu will be after me again, and Chekov, also. They're the only two of the command crew I am particularly wary of. Scott's too involved with his engines, and further promotion would only jeopardize his position as Chief Engineer. McCoy, as a member of the surgeon general's staff, is not in the running. Uhura," he said the name musingly. "Perhaps, I should pay more attention to her."

"Perhaps you should," Spock agreed, and Kirk immediately jumped on the statement.

"What do you know?" he demanded.

"Actually know? Nothing. But the lieutenant is an ambitious woman, and she does sit directly behind you on the bridge."

Kirk thought that over for a moment, drumming his fingers against the desk. "No, I don't think so. I think her target would be a lesser rank." Kirk looked into the hooded eyes of his first officer, trying to read what was inside Spock's mind. "Perhaps it's you I should be watching, eh, Spock?"

"The captain is well aware of my thoughts on the matter," the Vulcan replied stiffly. "I do not wish to command. But if I were ordered to do so, I would not hesitate to eliminate you, Captain, as you would me in a similar situation."

"That is our respective position," Kirk agreed, then with a wave of his hand dismissed the Vulcan.

Spock brought his right arm up across his chest in the Imperial salute. Kirk casually returned it, waiting until Spock was almost at the door before speaking again.

"There is one thing you can do for me."

"Sir?" Spock turned to face Kirk.

"Have Lieutenant Drost transferred from the ship as soon as possible. I tire of her presence."

"Acknowledged, Captain. I shall take care of the matter. Is there anything else?"

"Yes, call a command staff meeting for 1800 hours this stardate. I had better inform them what's going on, or at least some of it."

Aboard the Devisor, hurtling toward the neutral zone between the Imperial and Klingon space, Koloth sat in his elevated command chair, closely following the ship's progress. The lighting had a faint reddish cast, indicating battle alert status.

Korax stood nearby, glowering at the crew manning the bridge stations. Although not popular among the ranks, he made an excellent first officer, garnering at once both fear and respect from those he commanded. His advice was sound, Koloth knew, especially when evaluating more devious individuals, instinctively understanding them and their ways.

Korax knew only one way of dealing with the enemies of the Confederacy — attack! There was no softness in him, a true son of Klingon, and his commander sometimes envied him his single-mindedness of purpose. There was a time for finesse as well as a time for attack, which Koloth knew only too well. But because Korax could not understand this, he would never make an outstanding ship's commander. As a first officer, however, there was no one Koloth would rather have at his side.

"Distance to Neutral Zone," Koloth snapped.

"500,000 and closing."

"Come to 10,000, and then bring us into a parallel course with the border."

The navigator and the helmsman knew better than to question Koloth's order, or even to speculate between themselves concerning the Captain's intentions, so they merely exchanged glances which clearly said, "I wonder what he's up to now?"

"Anything on the monitors?"

"Negative, Commander," the navigator responded. "Sir, it might help if I knew what I was looking for," she suggested, rather timidly for a Klingon.

"If I knew what you were looking for, I would have told you," Koloth answered sharply before taking a tighter rein on his temper. Although berating the crew was often useful, it could be disastrous in their current position. The ship's alert status would assure peak efficiency without verbal tirades.

Koloth once again considered current ship deployment along the zone. If recent intelligence could be believed, the Enterprise was patrolling this sector. And Kirk was no respecter of treaties or of other peoples' territory. Koloth welcomed Kirk as an adversary. The Enterprise captain was devious, treacherous, and a brilliant strategist, and Koloth enjoyed matching wits with the Empire's best. Their previous encounters had been — interesting; the results — indecisive. Kirk was a worthy opponent. It would be unfortunate to have to kill him one day, yet Koloth knew it would come to that. Perhaps they would kill each other with the ultimate victor forever in doubt. He hoped it would not end so inconclusively.

Koloth was off duty, having his meal when the message came from the bridge.

"A strange signal, Commander. On a frequency we do not normally monitor, and would not have but for your orders to monitor all possible channels," the voice of Khris, the communications officer told him.

"Continue to monitor and recording," Koloth replied. "I shall be there shortly."

"There!" Khris said, moment's later, pointing at an indicator. "That's not a frequency in use by either the Imperials or the Confederacy. It is used only by occasional planetary groups for traffic within the local systems. The code is unknown, but the computer should have a translation for us shortly."

"Just those two sequences?"

"Yes, Commander. And not repeated. We were fortunate to intercept it."

"Yes," Koloth agreed, then added, almost as an afterthought, "Good work, Khris." Praise was not easily earned aboard this Klingon vessel. "I shall be in my quarters. Signal when the code is understood."

He nodded to Kalen, who had the rotation duty, and made his way to his spartan quarters. Despite Khris' assurance that the code would be easily broken, Koloth was not that certain. Any Imperial contact would have to be very circumspect lest discovery lead to exposure and death. No, he told himself, the message, if that was what this was, would take more than computer analysis to understand. But if this was indeed the message he awaited, then there would be a key to unlock the meaning, if only it could be found.

"Course paralleling the zone, Captain," Sulu reported.

"You're certain?" Kirk questioned.

"Aye, Captain," Sulu snapped.

Kirk nodded. Implying officer inefficiency was one of his favorite tactics. Any competent helmsman could bring the ship to the coordinates ordered based on the computer's course projection. That Sulu never made a mistake, never was off by so much as the merest fraction of a degree when announcing arrival at designated coordinates, only led to arrogance, especially when combined with his other duties as security chief. A decision concerning Sulu's future would have to be made — transfer or death — but that could wait until the present situation resolved itself.

Kirk did not yet have a precise plan for intercepting the Klingons. Several alternatives were available and he had decided to allow his command staff to debate them, hoping one of the options would emerge relatively unscathed.

"Time to briefing, Mr. Spock."

"43.4 standard minutes, Captain."

"Good." Kirk got up from his thronelike command chair. "I'll be in Sickbay until then. You have the con."

Arms were immediately raised in salute as Kirk sauntered toward the lift doors, his personal guard at the ready.

Later, slumped in a chair across the desk from the ship's chief medical officer, Kirk rubbed his eyes wearily, the beginnings of a headache sending out small fingers of pain.

The doctor, recognizing the signs, took a bottle from the shelf behind him, and poured two small pills into the captain's outstretched hand.

"You really should lay off these things," he advised his patient. "They can kill you under the right circumstances."

Kirk tipped his head back, tossing the pills into his mouth and drinking deeply from the glass of water McCoy handed him.

"I didn't ask for a lecture, Doctor," he snapped.

"No, but you're going to get one. Watch out for Spock, Captain. He's a lot more dangerous than you think."

"Spare me the repetition. Spock has the position he wants. The one thing I'm certain of in this universe is that Spock doesn't want to be captain. Just because you don't like him—"

Attempts had already been made to take advantage of the long-standing enmity between Spock and McCoy. Neither would do little to help the other, save in the

strict performance of their duties. The fact that McCoy's department fell administratively under the science officer did little to ease the hostility. Only Kirk's iron fist kept them from open warfare.

"It's not a matter of like or dislike, but a matter of logic."

Kirk looked up at that. "Now Spock would really be amused if he heard you resorting to claims of logic."

McCoy ignored the jibe. "Who else on this ship knows all your weaknesses?" he prodded the man who admitted to none.

"You do," Kirk replied.

"But I'm not in line to be Captain. Can you imagine if the medical corps entered the assassination fray? None of you would be safe. No, Spock's the most likely one to want to step up."

"What about the others — Sulu, Chekov — they've already tried it once."

"And will again. If they work together — admittedly a big if — but if they do, with the help of one or two others they just might succeed."

Kirk nodded. A combined attack might succeed where solo efforts failed. He pushed himself up from the chair.

"Think about what I said, Captain. Your position on this ship is not as secure as it once was."

"What do mean by that, McCoy?" Kirk demanded.

"You let Sulu and Chekov off rather easily. That kind of thing gets noticed."

"Thanks for the warning, Doctor, and for the pills. They are doing their usual excellent job."

Later at the briefing, Kirk allowed Spock to play "devil's advocate", while the captain sat back apparently little interested in the discussion. Kirk had identified and eliminated many ambitious junior officers in just this manner over the years. His senior officers had learned to be extremely wary of him during briefings, as apparent disinterest often masked intense observation. Of course, he hadn't always had Spock as front man, but once the partnership was formed, it had remained relatively impregnable, as well as extremely successful.

Kirk considered Sulu and Chekov seated at the other end of the table. Perhaps it was time to transfer them to a less tempting command. Their attacks on the "other" had emphasized a growing danger. He would keep them on board a while longer. As the old proverb said, better the danger you know than the one you don't.

Sulu was muttering under his breath, capturing Kirk's attention.

"If you have something to say, Mr. Sulu," the captain commented with deceptive mildness, "perhaps you had better share it with the rest of us."

"Sorry, sir," was all Sulu answered.

Kirk slammed his fist on the table. "Out with it. Or, don't you obey orders anymore, Mr. Security Chief?"

Sulu paled slightly; the others at the table drew back as if to avoid the verbal darts thrown at the chief helmsman.

When Sulu still didn't speak, Kirk's fist crashed into the table a second time. "I'm still waiting, mister!"

This time Sulu answered. He had pushed Kirk as far as he dared. And, Sulu did not wish to appear in danger of losing either of his positions on this ship.

"I was just wondering if our orders could somehow be faked, perhaps by the Klingons themselves, to lure us into the border area."

"To what purpose?" Spock asked.

"To attack us," Sulu replied.

Before Kirk could offer any comment, Chekov jumped in. "Attack is not the Klingon way. Defend — yes. Attack — no. They foolishly believe in the Organian Treaty. They would even if there was no imposed treaty. Perhaps it is the Organians themselves who are luring us into what I believe to be a trap. Once they have closed the trap on us, they will attack the Empire!"

Spock, his fingers steepled before him, the tips almost almost coming to rest on the point of his beard, refuted Chekov's assertions.

"The Klingons have indeed attacked in the past, when it appeared they could do so unscathed, Mr. Chekov. As for the rest of your analysis, the Organians have no reason to lure us into the zone. Their demonstrated power is sufficient to eliminate us, the Klingons and the Romulans simultaneously, if they so choose. However, at the moment, they prefer to observe our minor skirmishes with each other. If the Organians ever elect to move against us, they will not be so circumspect as to 'lure' us to the neutral zone. But, although I have no reason to doubt the genuineness of our orders, that does not preclude the possibility of tampering at the source."

"At Starfleet?" Kirk asked derisively. "Come on, Spock. You can't believe that?"

"I would point out to the captain that such an occurrence has already taken place, if you remember the fate of the Excaliber at the hands of the M-5 computer. That was traced back to a Romulan agent posing as a Vulcan. The plan was to destroy all the ships in the 'war games' as a prelude to invasion. While I do not believe that the current situation is similar, I suggest that no possible line of reasoning be eliminated merely because it seems improbable."

"Point taken, Mr. Spock," Kirk said. "Would anyone wish to comment further?"
No one did.

Mission record of the Klingon Confederacy Battlecruiser Devisor, Koloth commanding. We are still unable to interpret the aberrant radio signal, and although impulses have been converted into two sets of numbers, we are no closer to understanding their meaning. Computer analysis has been unsuccessful.

Koloth sat in his office, the numbers displayed on the viewscreen before him. Though the entire crew was involved in attempting to break the code, yet no one had yet come up with an answer. There was something familiar about the groupings, but what? Substitute numbers for numbers! That seemed to trigger something in Koloth's mind. Perhaps the numbers were just that — numbers!

He reached for the signaller on his desk. "This is Koloth. Come to my office."

He didn't wait for Korax' acknowledgment. The solution was here — right in front of him. He looked again at the numbers and then, he knew. It was the missing number set that had baffled them and Koloth knew exactly where to find that and complete the sequence.

The chimer rang, announcing Korax.

"Yes, Commander."

Koloth held out the numbers. "What do these numbers represent?"

The first officer looked at the now familiar digits.

"A code of some kind."

"No, take another look. What are these numbers — their significance?"

"I see no other significance," he responded.

"Korax, if you had never seen these numbers before and I handed them to you and said, here — these are your new orders, you would say—"

Korax took another look at the numbers and then he also knew. "I would ask you for the third coordinate."

"And, I would say—" Koloth prompted again.

This time Korax did not answer immediately. There was no other number connected with this transmission except, "The frequency!"

"Exactly!"

"But a frequency wouldn't have enough numbers to make up a third coordinate."

Koloth smiled slightly. "Not a Klingon frequency, but an Imperial one. And since we were lured here to the zone, it is reasonable that these coordinates indicate a position along or near the border."

Koloth fed the coordinates into his computer terminal and was rewarded with a starmap of an area near the neutral zone, but outside of either Klingon or Empire control.

"Our destination, Mr. Korax," he said pointing to the monitor display. "A small star system with one inhabited planet."

"And, what happens when we get there?"

"We wait. This may not be the only message to come our way. That frequency is being monitored?"

"Yes, Commander. If anything flutters a scan line, we'll know of it and have it recorded."

"Excellent. Whoever our contact is, he's clever. Continue to monitor and tape all frequencies, but I rather think our contact will choose some other means. Something we won't be able to even guess until we reach — what is the name of that planet?"

"Gurco."

"Until we reach Gurco."

"Sir!", Sulu announced, "I think we have them!"

Kirk stepped down from his command chair to peer over the helmsman's shoulder.

"Where?" he demanded.

Sulu pointed to an energy flux on an instrument. "There. The last time we crossed the path of a cloaked vessel, it gave the same type of reading."

Kirk watched the distortion for a moment. "You almost make me glad I didn't have you killed after the sickbay incident."

Kirk looked toward Spock, who had joined him at the helm console.

"Speculation?"

"It could indeed be a cloaked vessel. Mr. Sulu is correct in his observation that the reading is one we have encountered before. The ship, if indeed it is a ship, could be of either Romulan or Klingon origin, since Romulans use ships of Klingon design and the Klingons are known to have ships equipped with the Romulan cloaking device."

"Certainly more information than I need at the moment," Kirk snapped to the amusement of the others. Spock was rarely the target of the captain's sharp tongue, and the bridge crew enjoyed the Vulcan's discomfort. Kirk's watched the reading on Sulu's board for a few more minutes.

"I want to follow this anomaly, Mr. Sulu. Close enough not to lose the image, but far enough not to be detected. You know the range of Confederacy sensors?"

"Aye, sir. . .pursuing," Sulu announced, "beyond their sensor range."

"Now, show me on your board where they are and where we are."

Sulu touched a few buttons.

"Now, just keep us in this position relative to the other ship."

"Aye, sir."

Kirk went back to his command chair and stood there for several more minutes.

"Encode my log entries for the last 48 hours for Starfleet Command and update as needed, Uhura. But don't send anything. We wouldn't want to alert our quarry that he's being followed."

"Aye, Captain."

Spock, moving to stand next to Kirk, gestured to the Captain to follow him over to the bridge railing where they could speak more privately — if any place on the bridge could be called private. All conversation was routinely monitored by the security section and reports transmitted automatically to the nearest command base.

"Well?" Kirk asked, irritated.

"There is no way we can be certain that the image on the sensors is our target."

"No, but at the moment it's the only thing we've got, and since the image is moving parallel to the neutral zone and along our intended course, I see no reason why we shouldn't tag along — at a discrete distance, of course."

"I would suggest, Captain, that we continue to scan the area in the event this is not the object we seek."

Kirk nodded. "Of course. Implement."

Spock nodded and returned to his station.

Kirk wandered around the bridge, idly glancing at the instruments. Now, what, he wondered was that all about. Standard procedure dictated that all lines of inquiry remain open until they could be ruled out. Was Spock trying to distract Kirk from the sensor anomaly Sulu was following? Or, was he deliberately drawing attention to something soon to enter sensor range? And if either of these two options was viable, which one and, more importantly, why?

Kirk was well aware that with the exception of himself, Spock was the most dangerous man in the fleet. Should he choose to abandon his oft stated preference for scientific duties, Kirk would not hesitate to eliminate Spock, as he had others who challenged his ascendancy.

"Captain," Sulu called, "sensors report the energy flux has changed both speed and direction."

"An energy flux may change speed, Mr. Sulu, but it does not change direction. Heading?"

"Slightly away from the zone, but also away from Klingon territory. Into an unaligned sector."

"Display their course from the point of intercept and project it on the screen assuming maintenance of present course and speed."

The familiar starfield faded, replaced by a map detailing this section with the Empire in blue, Klingon territory in red and disputed territory in yellow. Superimposed onto the map, a white line hugged the border on the Klingon side, then turned slightly, heading for the yellow area.

"What's out that way?" Kirk asked. "Anything of interest?"

"Not much, Keptin," Chekov answered. "A few minor star systems with only a few planets capable of sustaining life."

Mr. Chekov," Spock calm voice floated across the bridge. "All planets are capable of supporting life if we assume that life has an infinite number of varieties, the vast majority of which are unknown to us."

Chekov stiffened slightly at the rebuke and clarified his report. "There are three Class M planets in the near vicinity, each of them occupied by relatively small populations, but not much of interest to the Empire."

"At least not yet," Kirk murmured. "Viewer ahead, Mr. Sulu. Mr. Spock, I want full analysis of the inhabited planets in this sector, including detailed mineral analyses. I want to know what's so interesting that a Klingon battlecruiser is heading for one of them."

"Acknowledged, Captain. They'll be available on the viewer in your quarters."

"Keep after that ship, Mr. Sulu, but don't let them know we're here."

"Aye, aye," Sulu replied with his customary sullenness.

Kirk returned to his command chair. He'd have to do something about Sulu. Best to get Chekov at the same time — either transfer them both or eliminate them. Get some younger officers in there who would be content to aim at lesser targets for a while.

Several hours later, Sulu reported that the ship was definitely heading for the fourth planet of the Gurco system. "There is no other possible destination on this heading."

"It is still possible, Mr. Sulu," Spock pontificated, "that the other ship is merely using this heading to deceive any possible followers and lure them into committing themselves to a course of action."

"That's enough Mr. Spock," Kirk interjected. "We'll follow it wherever it leads us. Steady as she goes, Mr. Sulu."

Aboard the Klingon vessel, preparations were under way for orbital station over Gurco. Korax stood next to the command chair, observing the automatic systems complete the maneuver. In the background, the communications officer was busy exchanging formalities with ground control.

"Commander, Gurco Reception Center, wishes to speak with you."

Koloth swiveled slightly in Khris' direction, nodded and pushed a button on the control panel next to him.

"This is Commander Koloth."

"Gurco Reception Center, Commander. We desire to know the reason for your visit. We are a neutral planet."

Koloth smiled diplomatically. "We request shore leave for our crew as well as an instrument check. We have been experiencing some problems with our navigation console and require assistance. It would not be wise to stray too far off course in this sector."

Koloth was pleased to see his navigator begin recircuiting the console.

The control center remained silent for several minutes before permission was given.

"Your crew can begin shore leave at your discretion, Commander. We hope our facilities will be congenial."

Koloth smiled his thanks. "And our instrumentation?" he prompted, trying to add credence to his earlier lie.

"A maintenance team is prepared to board your vessel upon your permission to assist in repair."

"Your assistance will be most welcome. Devisor out." Koloth then addressed the ship's crew. "Shore leave will commence with the start of the next rotation."

He turned to Korax. "Arrange shore leave, one-third of the crew at a time, then join me in my quarters."

Koloth stepped down from the command chair. Korax knew better than to take Koloth's place while Koloth still lingered on the bridge. Like all commanders, Koloth guarded his perquisites jealously. It was the end of the watch before Korax reported as ordered.

"Any messages?" Koloth asked.

"Nothing. All is silent."

"Then, it appears that we must go down to Gurco to make contact. Since we can't find them, they'll have to find us. We'll transport down with the next group."

Gurco was an unpleasant place. The kindest description of it was harsh. That was also the most accurate description. The Klingons found it homelike, as their own planets had little softness or beauty. Imperial subjects found little reason to remain for any length of time. Whatever the natives thought, they kept to themselves.

Korax smiled reminiscently as he and Koloth made their way through the Reception Center and into the city proper. "Reminds me of home. No Imperial decadence. Everything," Korax said, waving his arm, "functional, practical, useful. People here know what it means to fight every day just to survive. They should be Klingons!"

Contact was made later that same day, in a nondescript bar which catered to offworlders. At first, neither Klingon realized contact was being made. To all appearances, she was the "house woman", available to anyone — for a fee. She was, at least by Human standards, quite beautiful, with thick black hair, wide dark eyes and a softly curving mouth, though not in the first years of her beauty. Humans were known to prefer their women young, discarding them after the inevitable passage

of time. Perhaps that was why this particular one found herself eking out survival here at the end of nowhere. Koloth had looked her over with as much desire a Klingon was capable of feeling for a Human, but their mission dictated no more than cursory interest.

"Get you something, mister?" the woman asked provocatively, her hand resting lightly on one shapely hip. "Some Imperial Treasure?"

"Such as?" Korax asked, though the question was not directed at him.

"Such as . . . a brew made from a special formula and guaranteed to unlock hidden secrets."

"It would depend on whose secrets," Koloth replied.

"For you," the woman whispered while boldly assessing the two Klingons, "Imperial secrets."

"Perhaps after you've brought the drinks, you might join us," Koloth suggested.

The woman went over to the bar, allowing Korax to ask, "A contact?"

"Unlikely. Humans are known for their blatant sensuality, but it will not hurt to talk with her for a few moments. It will reassure any watchers concerning our stated purpose."

The woman returned, placing a tray with a bottle of Imperial Treasure and three glasses on the table. She slid gracefully into the vacant chair and poured the drinks while her dark eyes focused on the Klingon commander. Her open assessment was disturbing. Klingon females were not as bold.

"You follow my lead?" the woman asked.

"We follow your lead, but wonder where it will take us," Koloth responded.

"To victory and beyond, perhaps. Or, maybe into the pit. It depends."

"On what?"

"On you and what you do with what I have to offer."

"Perhaps," Koloth suggested with a bit of a leer, "we should find a more private place to conduct our business."

The woman looked around, a quick glance which was nevertheless thorough. "Sufficient time has elapsed," she agreed, adding with a small laugh, "If we don't leave together, my reputation will suffer. Although with the two of you, the opposite is much more likely to occur."

"I believe your reputation is quite safe, and I believe the proper phrase is — your place or ours?"

"Mine, I think," she answered and led the way out of the bar.

"May I know the name of the woman who guides me?" Koloth asked.

"Marlena," was the quiet answer. "Marlena Moreau."

"Formerly of Starfleet and the I.S.S. Enterprise?" Koloth said softly.

Marlena stopped briefly and then continued down the street.

"Yes, formerly of Starfleet and . . . the Enterprise."

They moved silently through dingy, deserted streets until reaching a small dwelling. It appeared no different than others on the planet, resembling a giant egg, its pointed end sliced off and set on the rocky ground — the color was the undistinguished brown of its neighbors.

Inside was far more comfortable than the exterior indicated. Large, reclining pillows were scattered about, mostly against the walls, with low tables close by. The floor was covered with a thick soft substance which continued up the walls to the ceiling. But, Koloth was quick to notice, the large room entered directly from a small hall did not account for all the space within the dwelling and he suspected a hidden door led to other, more utilitarian areas.

Marlena gestured toward a group of cushions. "Would you gentlemen like anything to drink before we begin? I have several spirits likely to please the Klingon palate."

"Perhaps later," Koloth suggested.

"Of course. You want to know why you were invited here," Marlena began as she sank easily onto the pillow across from the Commander. "You can talk freely. There are no recording devices or sensors."

"Perhaps you can speak freely, but I prefer not to commit myself until after I hear what you have to say and even then—" Koloth's hands lifted expressively.

"Of course, Commander, if that what you prefer. A wise precaution, no doubt, but unnecessary as you will discover. Before I continue, I am curious — how is it you know of me?"

"The exploits of the Enterprise and her captain are a hobby of mine, you might say, and you were a hobby of his."

Marlena shrugged. She leaned closer, lowering her voice as she spoke.

"Aboard the Enterprise there is a weapon capable of making the Empire the ultimate ruler of the Galaxy, with Kirk at its head. Few people even know of the existence of the weapon, but if Kirk's plans come to fruition, no planet — no group of planets — will be safe."

"What is the nature of this weapon?" Korax demanded. "History is filled with stories of ultimate weapons and their ultimate obsolescence."

"That is the reason we've invited you here."

Koloth was quick to jump on Marlena's words.

"We?" he snapped.

"Surely you did not think I was in this alone," she smiled disarmingly. "Stealing Imperial secrets is a job for more than one, I assure you."

Koloth resisted the urge to point out that the most effective spy often works alone.

"Then you don't have the weapon."

"No. But we have made it possible for you to steal it, thereby allowing your scientists the opportunity to develop a defense against it."

Koloth remained silent for several moments considering Marlena's suggestions before finally asking, "What kind of a weapon are you talking about? Phaser based technology? Proton? What is it?"

"None of those, I assure you. If it were, strengthening of existing shields might prove adequate protection. This weapon is based on an alien form of transporter technology, and is capable of removing enemies by merely activating the weapon once the viewscreen is focused on the target. Research is currently being conducted to duplicate the device and to expand the parameters within which the weapon operates, so that eventually an entire starship will cease to exist with the press of a single button."

"But why are you telling us this? Surely your loyalties are with the Empire."

"My loyalties are with myself, and I prefer life. How soon before every individual can eliminate every other one on a whim? At first, only those in power will have the weapon, but it will filter down as all weapons do until no one will be safe from anyone else. And, with the anonymity of the killer guaranteed, the final result would be anarchy all over the galaxy. I don't wish to live in the kind of a universe. Imperial scientists are not going to work that hard finding a defense until it is too late, but Klingon scientists would be only too eager to work on the project, since the weapon could mean the annihilation of the Klingon race."

"But," Koloth asked, "How do we know this weapon actually exists, that this isn't some kind of a ruse to entice us here for other purposes?"

"There is no way that I can give you the assurances you need. I can only tell you that the Enterprise is also on her way here, into neutral space, following reports of a Klingon ship in the area."

"A Klingon ship caught in a trap," Korax suggested.

"There is still time for you to escape. But if you do leave, you take with you the hope of survival of both the Klingon Confederacy and the Empire, as well as the Romulan republics. And all will end in chaos and barbarism before the final destruction."

"If I accept your position," Koloth said thoughtfully, "and I'm not saying that I do — but if what you say is true, why the Devisor? Why not some other ship?"

"For several reasons, the most important of which is that you and Kirk are not unknown to one another. Of all the Klingon Commanders Kirk has faced, he respects you. Believe me, there are few such individuals. To us that means that you are the most likely to carry off the project as we envision it, and even if our attempt to steal the weapon fails, you may still salvage something from the situation."

"Who are 'we'?" Korax demanded.

Marlena sat back against her cushion, appearing to somehow settle into herself. "We are various individuals, each with our own quite personal reasons for doing what we do — few of them altruistic. But ambition and revenge are well represented."

Koloth digested this information and the implication that more individuals were involved than might be prudent. He had hoped that Marlena represented one, at most two others. Plots of this nature were best kept secret when the numbers were kept to a minimum.

"How do I know I can trust you?"

"You don't, but can you afford not to? If but a fraction of what I tell you is true, you have no choice but to try to stop Kirk and steal either the weapon or its plans. To the best of my knowledge, not even Kirk knows how the thing works — only that it does. He has Spock working on duplicating it, but so far nothing has been accomplished."

"Spock's reputation as a scientist is well known, even among the Confederacy. Surely if he is unable to recreate the device—"

"Spock is only one man. You could bring the entire scientific community of the Confederacy to bear on the problem. And you will be thinking in defensive terms. Spock's emphasis is elsewhere."

Again there was silence as Koloth considered the words that had passed between them. "I need time to think about your proposal," the commander said as he stood. "You did not expect a decision this evening, I trust."

"No, that would have been irresponsible on your part, as well as cause for concern on mine. Had you given me an answer I should have had to alert my contact. A quick response would have been suspect, as it might indicate prior knowledge. As it is—"

"As it is, I have performed exactly as predicted — something like an experimental laboratory animal."

Marlena was also standing. "Scarcely, that," she protested. "How soon may I expect an answer?"

"By this time tomorrow."

Marlena nodded slightly. "If you would prefer to beam back to your ship from here," she suggested, "it might convince local watchers that you had indeed spent the night with me."

"And beam back down in the morning?"

"I doubt that would be necessary, gentlemen. The appearance of an all-night dalliance will be sufficient."

Within moments Koloth and Korax were back on the Devisor with a great many decisions to be made within the next several hours — decisions the commander would prefer not to have to make — but could not avoid. He would find little rest before he next contacted Marlena.

Kirk peered over Spock's shoulder, eyes intent on the delicate manipulations the Vulcan's long fingers were making to the equipment on the work table before him. They were alone in the laboratory, their personal guards maintaining watch outside the door.

"I believe, Captain, that I have solved the technical problems, but the actual composition of these circuits is unknown to Imperial science, and I can only approximate them. However—"

"Come on, Spock," Kirk said letting his impatience show. "Can you or can't you duplicate the Tantalus Field?"

"I do not know for certain, Captain. That will await testing of the duplicate I have constructed."

Kirk move away, walking around to the other side of the table while Spock continued fiddling with his construct. Kirk became thoughtful, wary, as he watched the Vulcan. "I sometimes wonder if I should have kept the Tantalus Field to myself. You would be a dangerous enemy with the device in your possession."

"Only if I were interested in command, Captain. As you know, I am not." He looked up at Kirk. "I find the discovery of how this weapon operates far more fascinating than the opportunity of using it to further my career."

"And," Kirk commented, "that is the only reason I've given you this assignment." He leaned closer, his hands resting on the near edge of the table, eyes lit with an inner fire. "Think of it, Spock, the whole universe can be mine with just a few of these. Control of the Empire within our grasp and after that, the other systems. Master of an entire universe."

"A goal often sought and never attained."

"But with this weapon I can," Kirk said as he pounded a fist on the table for emphasis.

"If duplication is possible," Spock coolly advised.

Kirk pushed himself angrily away, taking a turn about the room, before stopping once more opposite Spock.

"If it can be made once, it can be made again, is that clear? Or you might just disappear as so have many others before you."

Spock ignored the threat, the latest in a long litany. That Kirk could, if he wished, follow through on the threat was similarly dismissed. Kirk needed him. Spock had survived because of that need which Spock intended should continue for as long as Kirk managed to hold or extend his position in the Empire. The captain's current preoccupation with duplicating the Tantalus Field presented interesting alternatives — either success beyond imagination, or ignominious defeat and the destruction of all who shared in the obsession.

Spock tightened the last connection and looked up at Kirk, their faces scant inches apart. "If this plan fails, you are aware of the consequences — to both of us." It was a statement, not a question.

Kirk grinned suddenly, his face altering, softening, the intensity replaced with almost boyish enthusiasm as he anticipated the testing of the device. "I should," he responded. "You warn me often enough. Then the tension was back in his voice and eyes. "Are you ready?"

"Yes, Captain. Perhaps you would suggest a test subject?"

"Yourself?" Kirk suggested lightly.

"I should object to such a selection on the grounds that if the device should work, you will need others. If it doesn't, you have uselessly made an enemy in a universe where one's enemies are far more numerous than one's friends. However, as I am certain that you meant it as an attempt at humor—"

"Get on with it, Spock," Kirk cajoled. "That block of silicone over there would make an adequate subject."

"Indeed."

Spock carefully focused the viewscreen of his replication. "If it works here, we can try it from the adjacent room." At the last minute he offered the final act to Kirk, who declined with a wave of his hand and a shake of his head.

Spock nodded and then pressed the small button on the side of his device. Behind him, the silicone block glowed briefly, then disappeared, leaving no evidence of either it's presence or of its demise. It was simply gone. On the table, sputtering circuits combined with a small eddy of smoke that had both Kirk and Spock reaching for fire extinguishing equipment before sensors could sound the alarm. The duplicated Tantalus Field was a smoking ruin of twisted metal and incinerated circuits.

"What went wrong?" Kirk finally asked.

"I do not know," Spock admitted, "but I suspect it was the circuit components. Obviously, the device works but in so doing, the circuits overheat. I have have to try other combinations of materials on the next one."

Kirk didn't comment, but stood looking at the scorched equipment, and then turned on his heel and left the laboratory.

Mission record of Klingon Confederacy Battlecruiser Devigor, Koloth commanding. Additional. I have presented the proposal to my senior officers, and after much discussion and dissent we are agreed that another contact is warranted. Suitable safeguards will be initiated. Details on tape of staff meeting held this date.

All Koloth's precautions did little to prevent the debacle of the following day. He and Korax beamed down to Gurco and made their way to Marlena's dwelling. Invited inside, they found themselves facing Earthers aiming phasers in their direction. Security personnel everywhere pride themselves on their efficiency and these individuals were no different. The two Klingons were quickly relieved of their disruptors and communicators and beamed aboard the Enterprise before Kalen could suspect that events had turned against them.

There could be no doubt where they were — the Empire's pierced Earth symbol adorned the walls and was visible on the rather garish uniform worn by a grinning Kirk, who met them in the transporter room.

"My old friend, Koloth," Kirk mocked. "Let me welcome you to the Enterprise. To what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?" Kirk's quick glance at the chief of the security detachment verified that his visitors had been relieved of anything they might find useful for escape. Kirk was rather pleased with himself. A neat trap neatly sprung. Just enough truth to make Marlena's story believable. She was becoming a very dependable adjunct to his plans.

"The 'unexpected pleasure' is all mine, I assure you, Captain Kirk," Koloth replied smoothly, bowing slightly while taking in the details of the room. He noted that Korax was doing the same.

"Save yourselves the trouble," Kirk advised them. "You'll be Imperial guests for some time to come."

"That, of course, is a matter of opinion," Koloth returned easily. "The Klingon High Command rather frowns on the kidnapping of its officers by the Empire."

"But the Confederacy will never know what happened." Kirk glanced at his chronometer. "We should be crossing into Imperial space as we talk. If your ship follows standard procedures, they won't have realized that you're missing until we are so far away that the trail will be too cold to follow. You, my old friend Koloth, are going to be with us for some time to come. As for your companion," Kirk said as he gestured toward Korax, "I fear his presence will be of rather shorter duration."

Koloth felt Korax stiffen slightly, but remain silent.

Kirk waved a hand towards the door. "However brief or long your stay, perhaps you would accompany me to your uh — quarters."

"Do we have any choice?" Koloth asked.

"No," Kirk agreed, "but it won't hurt to ease the discomfort of your stay. You must be feeling particularly embarrassed at the moment — to be caught so easily."

"How do you know were caught?" It's possible that we willingly allowed you to capture us," Koloth suggested lightly.

Kirk laughed outright. "An interesting attempt to save the situation," he commented, "but I'm afraid I don't accept your explanation." He moved toward the door. "Won't you come this way, gentlemen? I trust your visit will prove interesting and educational, although not particularly pleasant."

The Klingon officers accompanied Kirk out of the transporter room, the security team following closely.

"— of course, your quarters will have to be a little sparse," Kirk was saying, "but they have the advantage of being secure from unwanted visitors."

"As you say, Captain," Koloth answered meaninglessly. "But before that, I would be interested in what you hope to gain by bringing us here. The Confederacy and the Empire are at peace."

"For the moment," Kirk admitted, "but I intend to alter that relationship."

"And we are to play major roles in that plan?"

"You might say that, Commander."

They rounded a corner and Kirk stopped before one of several security cells lining the corridor on either side. The Enterprise apparently had far more need of such areas than the Devisor. Kirk gestured toward an unoccupied cell. "Gentlemen?" The Klingons entered without protest, the force field activating after them.

Kirk stood for a moment, his eyes locked on Koloth's as each silently measured his adversary. Kirk looked away first, and sketching a mocking salute to the Klingon Commander, turned and disappeared down the corridor. The security men took up positions on either side of the door.

Korax began a systematic search of the room, but Koloth waved him to a seat on one of the bunks. "Of course we are under observation, and our conversation is being overheard. Even we take such precautions," Koloth commented. Nonetheless, Korax did not stop his investigation of the cell, needing to satisfy himself as to the measures taken to secure the prisoners. The voice and image monitors were easy to identify, but several other sensors gave no hint as to their purpose. Korax didn't bother to speculate, but came to join his commander.

"I never thought it would end this way," Koloth said morosely in Klingonese. "Somehow I believed that if I were to die in the service of the Confederacy, it would be aboard my own ship."

"For the glory of the Confederacy," Korax intoned with little enthusiasm.

"Klingons should die in battle, not caught like some unwary animal in a trap."

The prisoners sounded more and more depressed as they intoned almost ritual sayings of alternately worthy and unworthy ways of dying. The security personnel observing the monitor screens only saw the slumped bodies, heard the monotone words tinged with regret and shame. They saw and heard exactly what the Klingons wanted them to see and hear. The universal translators worked overtime first translating Klingonese into Imperial basic and then searching for hidden meanings in the words. None were found.

While all this was happening, Koloth and Korax were indeed conducting a very spirited and meaningful conversation. While mouthing ritualistic phrases, they tapped out messages in each other's hand rather like the communication of individuals who are both blind and deaf. The discussion was far ranging — from possible escape plans to quick, painless methods of suicide, if all was truly lost. They continued the chanting and the hand coding well into the ship's night.

Kirk was in his cabin relaxing when Spock reported on the Klingons' behavior. With a glance in the direction of the female crewmember sprawled in Kirk's bed, Spock handed a clipboard to the captain, then moved slightly back from the desk.

Kirk scanned the report quickly, then looked up, questioning. "That's it? Nothing more?"

"It appears to be some kind of Klingon ritual chanting, focusing primarily upon the glories of dying for the Confederacy. Illogical, but in keeping with Klingon philosophy as we understand it."

"No Klingon gives up this easily. If so, we would have conquered them long ago. They are a warrior race. Strengthen the guard." Kirk looked up to find just the merest hint of disapproval in Spock's face. "Alright, out with it."

"There is no reason to believe that even if the prisoners are making escape plans, that those plans can be effectuated, given the security measures now in effect. To add more guards—"

"Spock -- just do it and spare me the lecture. When do you plan to begin questioning Korax?" Kirk asked, as he handed the clipboard back to the Vulcan.

"I prefer to wait for a while yet. You have already indicated which of them is vulnerable. I am allowing that information to produce its own effect."

"I doubt if you'll have much luck. Klingon command conditioning would take that type of action into effect."

"Correct, Captain, but there is no reason to believe that such conditioning is given to anyone below the rank of ship's commander."

"As you wish. Just don't harm him permanently. I'm considering using the Klingons in a little game of my own, and we may need him." Kirk glanced toward the sleeping area. "Have Lieutenant Moreau meet me at the beginning of Delta shift."

"Indeed, she performed well on the last assignment," Spock agreed.

"That isn't exactly what I wanted to discuss with her," Kirk admitted.

"If the Captain will excuse me," Spock suggested.

"Of course, Mr. Spock. Your duties no doubt call you elsewhere, is that it?"

Spock, with one final glance toward the rear of the cabin, agreed.

"But keep me informed of your progress."

"Acknowledged, Captain."

Marlena Moreau was draped across Spock's bed when he returned to quarters. He ignored her obvious invitation, moving to his desk and activating the computer terminal.

"Too bad you're immune, Mr. Spock," Marlena purred.

"Not necessarily immune, Lieutenant, merely cautious."

Marlena stood and moved closer, eyeing the Vulcan with new interest. "Perhaps I can make you less cautious," she said lifting her arms toward him.

"I doubt that, Lieutenant," he replied absently.

"Well, you can't blame a girl for trying."

"Be thankful that you are not in fact the woman of a Vulcan. You would find the duties most repugnant. It is enough that you are assumed to be my woman without actually becoming so. That, alone, offers you protection aboard this vessel."

"Protection, if not respect, and that protection is limited."

"The captain will make no moves against you unless--"

"It suits him?" Marlena interrupted.

"--unless you do something very stupid. He has requested your presence in his quarters at the start of Delta Shift."

"And, in his bed, if I know the captain. But, requested?"

"Ordered, if you prefer. And, it would be well to remember that respect is either earned through work or acquired through strength, but is never transferred through association."

Molecular structure images flickered across the computer screen in increasingly complex relationships as Spock keyed various combinations into the computer. Marlena stood behind him, identifying several of the elements he sought to combine.

"Connectors?" she finally asked.

Spock looked up from the screen, the steady change of schematic momentarily halted. "Of course," he said finally, "one forgets that you have scientific training." He turned back to the screen. "The structures are experimental. The previous models worked for a limited time."

"Burned right up, did they?" she asked rather annoyingly.

"Affirmative."

It was much later, after Marlena had left for Kirk's cabin, that Spock found an alloy which might possibly prove useful. He recorded the formula and in the laboratory, manufactured and shaped the alloy and installed it in the new Tantalus Field construct.

Kirk would be making his captain's tour at this hour. Nothing ever interfered with that inspection, at least until now. The crew would welcome the interruption, as Kirk used the agonizer rather indiscriminantly.

"Spock to Captain Kirk."

"Kirk here." The response came quickly. "What is it, Mr. Spock?" Acute Vulcan hearing caught the faint sounds of a disciplined crewman over intercom.

"I suggest you come to the laboratory."

"On my way."

Kirk would find nothing obscure about the reference. There was only one laboratory focusing his interest. Spock had already prepared for the demonstration when the captain arrived.

Kirk glanced briefly at the device and at the titanium target. They had agreed to test the most durable metal following the initial success with the silicon. He nodded to Spock to begin the experiment, but reached out a hand before the Vulcan made contact with the activator.

"I think I'll do it this time," he said.

As before, the test subject glowed briefly and disappeared. And, also as before, smoke was soon curling from the duplicate. Kirk pounded his fist on the table.

"Mr. Spock," he hissed softly, "I told you that I wanted an operative device, not a smoking failure which endangers my ship each time it is tested."

"The ship is hardly in danger, Captain," Spock placated. "As for the test device, I have been unable to find an alloy capable of withstanding the matter neutralizing beam generated by the device. The beam disintegrates the alloy as it passes through the mechanism, thereby destroying parts of the mechanism as well as the target object. In order to produce the effect on a recurring basis, a resistant alloy must be developed. If would you let me examine the device in your cabin again and perhaps remove a sample of the casting—"

"And disable my one working model? You must be mad to even suggest it. Without it, I could not hold command of this vessel!"

"You command as much from personal strength and ability as from the advantage the Tantalus Field gives you over your enemies."

"I could not have risen to captain in a service where birth and connections count more than ability without the Tantalus Field. It is also how I keep my command, and how my first officer keeps his position as well. Remember that, Mr. Spock!" Kirk flung himself away, fighting to master his rage at Spock's failure to perfect a second Tantalus Field.

"Have you ever considered, Captain, that the name of the device itself leads one to reflect that, like the punishment of the ancient Tantalus, this device causes equal anguish in its owner since it has, at least so far, defied attempts to reproduce it and therefore gain even greater station in life."

Kirk looked at Spock as if he had proposed turning the Enterprise into a cargo ship.

"Absurd!"

"I would consider it, Captain, before the search for a duplicate consumes the searcher."

"A threat, Spock?" Kirk asked with deadly quietness.

"Negative, Captain — a warning. I should desire no other commander."

"See that your opinion remains unchanged," Kirk snapped as he left the laboratory to continue his inspection. The agonizers would be busy this afternoon.

Down in the brig, the prisoners continued their steady chant much to the irritation of the security guards outside the cell. Several times they ordered silence, once even punctuating those orders with blows, but the Klingons continued the seeming unending ritual designed as much to irritate the captor as to console the captive.

After a time, the guards entered and took Korax away, presumably for interrogation. They would find out little. Korax' fierce pride would insure his silence. It wasn't long before the guards were back, this time for Koloth. He was

marched through a maze of corridors until finally he was pushed through a door, stumbling slightly before regaining his balance. The guards departed and Koloth found himself alone with the Enterprise captain.

"I understand you were chanting for the dead," Kirk taunted. "Most appropriate. I regret to inform you that your friend may not rejoin us."

Koloth's anger flared. There was just the two of them in this room, and he could easily overcome Kirk before the guards entered. But then what? This battle would be won by brains, not brawn and the time was not yet right.

Kirk intently watched the Klingon's eyes, reading first the wish to attack, followed by a loosening of tense muscles as the Koloth relaxed slightly.

"Be thankful you didn't try anything," Kirk said. "Your friend would have suffered for your stupidity."

"Only a fool would attack with your guards outside the door awaiting your signal to enter."

"And, you of course, are no fool, Commander."

Koloth inclined his head with a slight smile.

"I thought," Kirk said smoothly putting on the mantle of genial host, "that you might like to know the why I arranged for you to be brought here."

"I thought I already did."

Kirk laughed. "That was for the benefit of others who have no need to know my plans — a diversion, of sorts." Kirk moved over to a device sitting on the laboratory table. "This is what you came to get, I believe," he began, watching Koloth for any sign of surprise. "Or, rather its original."

When Koloth remained silent, Kirk prodded a bit more. "Go ahead. Take a good look. It's going to win the universe for us."

Koloth did look at Kirk then. "Us?" he asked, genuinely puzzled. Perhaps there was a meaning to the word he did not understand.

"Us! You and me, Koloth. Between us, we can take over the entire galaxy — with the help of this machine." Kirk put his hand on the device. "Marlena told you what it could do. Would you care for a demonstration? Your friend Korax would be a suitable subject."

Koloth waited a minute before replying, as if considering Kirk's suggestion. "I would prefer some another target. Korax still has some usefulness left in him."

Kirk glanced at the wall chronometer. "Perhaps," Kirk replied with a shrug.

Koloth ignored the implication, focusing instead on the figure of the Enterprise captain casually relaxing against the lab table, arms crossed against his chest, that boyish look accentuated by a lock of hair that had fallen onto his forehead. At this moment, Kirk looked no more dangerous than some innocent playing at being a soldier — easy prey to the ambitions of others.

"If you would care to explain, Captain," the Commander suggested. "I presume it was you who lured us to Gurco and set Marlena in our path."

Kirk neither affirmed nor denied the statement. "Let us just say I take advantage of my opportunities."

So, Koloth thought, it was not Kirk who planted the seeds of this mission with the High Command. And, if not Kirk, then who?

"What Marlena told you of my plans is essentially correct. However, it would be easier if I had a little help — from the opposition. The Romulans are too dedicated to honor to be of any use to me." He cast another appraising look at Koloth. "The Klingons have possibilities."

"Then you do plan to take over the entire galaxy," Koloth mused as if even now he did not quite believe the enormity of Kirk's plans.

"Of course," the Captain stated easily, "but even with the Tantalus Field, I could not tackle this project alone. If Command should learn of the plan, they would not suspect that help was available from the Klingon fleet." Kirk smiled a little to himself. "There are numerous regulations against it!"

"Doubtless," Koloth agreed flatly. "And, what is to be the Klingon role? I must confess to some curiosity, if only to delay my own departure from among the living."

Kirk moved away from the table, his hands now behind his back as he paced the room. "It is simplicity itself. I have a weapon capable of removing anyone who stands in my way. It is presently being duplicated by my Science Officer. With those units in the hands of my agents, I can quickly overcome the power structure of the Empire and secure the lines of command in my own hands."

"What is to prevent one of your agents from eliminating you and assuming control?"

"Why, you, my friend Koloth, you!"

Kirk moved closer, stopping before the Klingon. "That is the beauty of it all — who would have thought you would be with me in this."

"But I haven't said that I will join you."

"You will, once you understand what such a collaboration will bring you. Wealth. Power. Your own fleet. What Klingon could turn down a taste of ultimate power!"

Who indeed, Koloth wondered.

"You might consider the alternative. Death in the Empire is rarely pleasant or from natural causes."

Koloth, however, needed no such reminder. Kirk's offer was intriguing in that it guaranteed continued life — at least for the moment. Once Kirk attained his goals, he would move quickly to destroy not only his enemies, but those of his followers he perceived as dangerous. Koloth had no doubt that he would be high on Kirk's assassination list.

Still, Koloth had little choice. "Release Korax and we can talk."

"Easily arranged," Kirk agreed and walked to the wall communicator. "Mr. Spock, bring the prisoner, Korax, to the laboratory." He didn't wait for the Vulcan's reply.

"I trust you haven't damaged him too severely," Koloth commented.

"If so, my chief medical officer has always wanted to study Klingon anatomy, and this may be his opportunity."

Koloth was about to protest, but Kirk raised a hand to stop him. "Doctor McCoy does not always subscribe to Imperial treatment of subject races. His interest in your companion will be as a doctor. He's known as something of a rebel in the Surgeon General's office. None of his promotions have come in the usual way."

"Tell me, Kirk, how does your fleet continue to exist when assassination is so readily practiced?"

"Even promotion has its rules. Eliminating your superior is no guarantee. Command does not look kindly on an officer who removes a superior for no reason. Although," Kirk added with a cunning smile, "there are usually a number of reasons that can be used to justify actions, and the dead have little defense."

The door swished open and Kirk was instantly on the alert, hand resting on his phaser, relaxing only when he identified his first officer ushering Korax into the room.

The Klingon, Koloth was pleased to note, appeared better than expected, although obviously a bit dazed and favoring his right side. But for all that, he moved unsupported by the Vulcan.

"Well?" Kirk asked. "You've looked him over and seen that he's not dead and will remain among the living — with your help and assistance."

"You know the answer already. I have no scruples against money or power. In that, Klingons are one with the Empire."

"If we had had this discussion years ago instead of trying to blast each other out of space, there is no telling how high we could have climbed by now."

"I suggest we do not waste more time, Koloth agreed. "A union between our two ships is long over due." He paused slightly, before asking, "When do we get a demonstration of this all powerful weapon of yours?"

"Soon," Kirk assured him, "very soon. Mr. Spock," Kirk snapped, "escort our guests to new quarters." Then he turned back to Korax. "A personal guard will be assigned to you from my own staff. Oh, and I would suggest that you don't try to use the same kind of blackmail on me that I used on you, Commander. I care nothing for those around me."

Quarters were definitely more congenial than cells, Koloth was quick to assess. They had been given what appeared to be a guest cabin, softly furnished in the Imperial manner.

Korax slumped down onto one of the beds, his face much paler now that Koloth got a better look at it. He said nothing. Klingons didn't complain. Koloth ignored any discomfort Korax might be experiencing and prowled the space, seeking the inevitable listening and viewing sensors.

"I suggest," he said lowering himself onto one of the beds, "that we get some rest. I fear there will be little time for such luxury in the future."

Elsewhere on the Enterprise, the Klingons' presence was much discussed. Kirk's removal of the Klingons from the detention area to cabins on the officers' deck was provocation enough for ambitious young officers eager to move up in rank. Promotion on the Enterprise was difficult to attain. Kirk wielded much influence within Starfleet, but did nothing to further the careers of his crew. Despite contributions to the success of a mission, Kirk never mentioned anyone save himself in his reports to Command, and resentment ran deep.

Lieutenant Sulu was again plotting to assume command of the ship, this time gathering the support of other officers who shared his frustrations. Uhura from Communications saw her career blocked by more senior officers and was willing to take the necessary risks. Ensign Chekov, who had just regained officer status following his last attempt on Kirk, delighted in intrigue and willingly joined the conspirators.

The meeting was held in the main rec room, where the group was surrounded by the noise of off duty crewmen pursuing relaxation and each other. It was an effective cover for the plans being laid among them.

"The keptin has made yet another mistake with the Klingons. We can move against him any time," the Russian declared.

"The captain," Sulu reminded him, "cannot be easily taken. His enemies are still disappearing."

"As you have reason to know," Uhura pointed out to Sulu's embarrassment. Word of his unsuccessful attempt on Kirk had spread quickly throughout the ship.

"If the Captain should find out we are against him—" Sulu began.

"He already knows we are against him. We have tried before to kill him, and I am tired of waiting for him to make his move against me," Chekov declared.

"Or take the consequences?" Uhura asked.

"You forget, I have already experienced the consequences. I have no intention of doing so again."

"There is Spock to consider," Uhura reminded them. "Do we take him out now or wait until a later time? Waiting means he will be captain, and for all Kirk's personal guard and disappearing enemies, part of his protection is the fact that Spock is second in command and would become captain should Kirk meet an untimely end."

Sulu nodded in agreement. "I do not think I would like to serve under Spock for long, if at all. He sees too much, knows too much. Sometimes I think he can read minds."

"Anybody who can read the stray emissions of the computer would hardly find your mental processes difficult to assess, Mr. Sulu," Uhura said with contempt. Several crewman had recounted the story of her counterpart's insult to the Security Chief and Uhura knew Sulu merely awaited the success of his plan to take his revenge against her. For the moment, though, she was willing to support him. Let Sulu take the risks now. The eventual victory would be hers.

Sulu cast a venomous look, but she ignored him, preferring instead to support his desire to be Kirk's executioner. "Mr. Sulu is the one to make the kill, and I would support eliminating Spock at the same time. I, too, have no wish to serve under a Vulcan!" she said with distaste.

There were nods of agreement from the others. Chekov was also willing to have Sulu take the glory for the moment. The morose young ensign had plans of his own.

"The best time to strike is on the bridge during shift change, while everyone's attention is on other things," Sulu said, and presented his plan.

Koloth's name was being called over the intercom. He reached automatically for the com switch only to feel the smooth bulkhead behind the bunk. There was brief puzzlement before memory came flooding back. It took a minute to identify the com panel and he pushed the only button and identified himself.

"Spock here, Commander. The Captain has requested that you and Mr. Korax be given a tour of the ship, and it would be my honor to accompany you."

"The honor would be ours, Mr. Spock," he replied easily. "Where shall we meet you, always assuming that we would be allowed to do so."

"Tell your escorts to direct you to the main recreation room. I shall meet you there. Refreshments will also be available."

"The main recreation room, then," Koloth agreed and thumbed the switch. He turned to see Korax making his uncertain way across the room.

"Their muscle probe is highly efficient," he informed his commander. "Even now the smallest movement initiates interesting sensations."

Koloth knew this mild statement concealed painful reality, but he could not help himself from questioning Korax' use of the word "interesting" to describe interrogation procedures.

"One of the Vulcan's descriptions. Another time he described certain results as 'fascinating'." That was just after the quiet, unhurried voice had suggested the placing of one probe "just a little to the left, if you please, Mr. Shelk," and Korax had lost consciousness in a searing wave of agony. There were several such lapses before Kirk's call brought a halt to the proceedings.

"I was told I should be grateful that he was conducting the session rather than Kirk." He paused a moment, remembering. "It will be difficult to accept them as allies."

"We have little choice — you realize this is all being recorded."

"Standard procedure, as we would ourselves, but I do not care if he knows. In fact, I want him to know that Klingons have long memories and do not consider revenge complete until it is repaid tenfold."

The recreation room was large even by Imperial standards, occupying most of one entire deck save for the ring of cabins along the outer wall of the encircling corridor. To the Klingons, accustomed to the cramped quarters aboard the Devisor, it was one more indication of the the decadence of the Empire.

Spock was waiting for them. Korax stiffened at the sight of the Vulcan, but gave no other indication that he had special cause to remember their previous meeting. He turned away, looking about the room and actively returning the animosity directed toward the two Klingons.

"Many on board have cause to dislike Klingons, Commander," Spock said. "I trust an Imperial would receive a similar welcome aboard your ship."

Spock led them to a small table where food was provided, the first they had had since leaving the Devisor. It was a silent meal in hostile surroundings, and though the food was not to Klingon taste, it was at least nourishing and plentiful.

"If you are finished," Spock said, "we can begin our tour here." He went on to describe the various activities pursued in the off hours, many barbarous and cruel.

As they walked through the ship, security guards were everywhere — guarding against whom, Koloth wondered, certainly not two Klingon officers under close surveillance.

"You are afraid of your own crew?" he finally said, more a statement than a question, but still demanding an answer.

"The Empire believes in protecting its own.

"From its own."

"If you wish," Spock said as he led them into his own quarters. The inevitable guard stationed beside the door came to attention and saluted. Spock ignored the man, keying his access code into the lock, then saying his own name, before the door slid open.

"Gentlemen," Spock began, gesturing towards chairs. "This is the one place on this ship that I am relatively certain is secure."

"Relatively?" Koloth asked as he sat down.

"If this cabin is under observation, I have not been able to detect it. And, if it is, what I am about to say condemns me to a worse death than you now face."

"So?" Koloth prompted.

The Vulcan sat at his desk, hands steepled together before him, eyes hooded. "The captain's reasons for your presence on the Enterprise are his own. He made use of the opportunities which presented themselves. I made those opportunities possible and I have other interests."

"You planted the seed with High Command that brought us into this quadrant. Why?"

"Logic demands the captain's plan be prevented from coming to fruition."

"That sounds very much like treason," Koloth commented.

"No more so than the overthrow of the Imperial hierarchy and the ascendancy of James Kirk to the pinnacle of power."

"And, in betraying your captain, you take command of this ship, earning the gratitude if not the trust of your superiors, and the grudging respect, and fear of the crew. But you need a defense against Kirk's weapon, and what better way to get one than to have the entire scientific community of the Confederacy finding one."

"I would remind the commander that it is you who need the defense. By eliminating Kirk, I would have the Tantalus device for myself and would not want to see the development of a defense against it, as it would lessen my own position. But I wish no such transfer of command aboard this vessel."

"All right, then what do you want? And where do we fit in?"

"You are going to steal the Tantalus Field from the Captain's cabin and make good your escape."

Korax made what was for Klingons a very rude sound. "Just like that — walk into Kirk's cabin and take this Tantalus thing without detection?"

"Either that, or the device itself will be eliminated, thereby effectively halting for the moment Kirk's dream of supremacy. Your escape will not be that simple, but other events will transpire which will direct the attention of the security personnel to other areas of the ship."

"That will have to be a rather large diversion to get us off safely," Koloth said, his tone inviting further confidences of the Vulcan, but none were forthcoming.

"It will sufficient to your needs," he was assured.

The "diversion" planners were once again together in the middle of the rec room.

"I see no advantage in waiting," Uhura was saying. "In fact, waiting could be more dangerous than acting. With each hour, we are closer to Kirk's discovery of our plans. Tomorrow, Delta shift change, would be my choice."

Chekov nodded. "I would even prefer to do it sooner — next shift change, if possible."

"In," and here Sulu made a show of looking at his chronometer, "five minutes? You must think more of our chances than even I do to proceed without an effective plan."

"The security guards are with us," Chekov reported. "They will take out Kirk's personal guard."

"They had better."

"What about Spock," Uhura asked.

"You'll take care of Spock. You're on the same bridge level as he is. His attention will be immediately on Kirk when I strike, and that will be your signal to attack."

"Masterful," Uhura said falsely. She had her own plans for the Vulcan, intending merely to delay him long enough to see Kirk safely removed and then she would turn on Sulu and Chekov and ride Spock's coattails for a while as first officer. Scott, though next in line, would not want such a position.

"We won't meet again," Sulu stated. "Just remember your parts and do them, and we'll all be moving up." He moved away without saying anything further.

"I wonder how long he'll last," Chekov muttered.

"If he makes command at all," Uhura speculated.

"I don't like trusting these Earthers," Korax declared the next day.

"There is little else we can do at this time, but I share your concern." Koloth motioned his first officer to silence, then gestured towards the door before again indicating silence.

"If they have any sense, they know we're planning something. No Klingon worthy of the name would easily succumb to Imperial blandishments.

Koloth moved toward his companion, anger clearly visible on his face. "I told you to be quiet!"

Korax' own anger appeared briefly on his face before discipline reasserted itself.

"I await word from our contact," he said quite formally.

"Quiet, you fool. Do you want to give everything away?" Koloth threatened, but as he turned his back to the sensors he signalled a "well done" to his first officer.

Kirk, watching them on the monitor in his cabin, smiled. It didn't hurt to have the enemy fighting among themselves. And, it told him something else he needed to know. Someone on the Enterprise was working with the Klingons to betray the Empire. That individual would have a long time to regret his treachery.

Kirk thought for a moment before deciding how best to use the information he had just acquired and how best to remove the traitor from his midst.

"This the captain. Mr. Spock, report to my quarters."

Sulu, Uhura, and Chekov were on the bridge, each anticipating change of shift. Sulu had the con, though he remained at the helm. The captain guarded his prerogatives zealously.

At communications, Uhura acknowledged the receipt of a message from Starfleet and then announced, "Captain Kirk to the bridge. Communication from Starfleet Command."

Starfleet directives required the Kirk's presence, and this assured he would be on the bridge at the crucial time.

Uhura hummed a lively melody. The message was her own fabrication, bits and pieces of previous command messages carefully fitted together. Neither Sulu nor Chekov had suggested preparing for the eventuality of Kirk's absence. She considered the lack of contingency plans indicative of limited command skill. It was clear to her who among the three would rise to the captaincy.

The Klingons followed the Vulcan crewman through unknown areas of the ship, somewhere near Engineering, Koloth guessed. The arrival of the Vulcan Sepah, dragging the unconscious guards into the Klingon's cabin, had been unexpected.

Sepeh did not need to identify his superior. The fact that he was Vulcan was enough. Vulcans were known, even among the Klingons, for loyalty to their own beyond any oath or pledge they may have given.

"Change quickly," Sepeh ordered. "We have little time." He was stripping the guards of their uniforms and tossing them to Klingons. "It will be assumed that somehow you lured them into this room, overpowered them, and made good your escape. The monitoring tape will confirm that premise."

"Your superior plans well," Koloth commented, struggling to force his feet into too tight boots.

Sepeh merely nodded. He was busy removing a concealed panel in the wall and smashing sensors using the leg from one of the chairs in the cabin. He inspected both the room and the Klingons before cautioning, "I would remind you that we do a great deal of saluting on this ship," and then led the way into the corridor.

Kirk lounged in his desk chair, his glance falling casually on his Vulcan first officer at attention before him.

"Analysis?"

"Obviously an attempt to cause dissension among us," Spock replied. "No officer would make such a statement knowing he was under observation."

Kirk leaned forward in his chair. "Did it occur to you that there might be a Klingon operative on board this vessel?"

"Surely that question is best asked of Mr. Sulu."

Kirk fist struck the desk. "Dammit Spock, what if Sulu is the operative? I can't trust any of them!"

"As captain of the Enterprise, you must be suspicious of everyone on board. Surely that is a command requirement."

Kirk once more settled back into his chair. "Of course," he acknowledged, "but, if there is an operative—"

The communicator panel signaled. "Captain Kirk to the bridge. Communication from Starfleet Command."

"What the devil is it this time," Kirk muttered before acknowledging the call. "Can't they do anything on their own? You," he told Spock, "return to the lab and see if you can get that thing to work. Try that new idea of yours — using the duplicate to activate the main device."

Sepeh led the Klingon officers to Spock's laboratory. As instructed, the Klingons took positions on either side of the inside door, full face helmets in place, and arms crossed in the manner of Empire guards. The plan was simple. They were to wait until Spock arrived, appear to overpower the Vulcan and steal the device. But Koloth was wary of simple plans which in fact relied on many different individuals unknowingly working in conjunction with one another. Too much could go wrong and, Korax would probably add, usually did.

On the bridge, Kirk went directly to the communications console seating himself at Uhura's hastily abandoned station. With the transponder in his ear, he keyed in his command cyphers, and listened to Command's new orders. Taking the Enterprise off Neutral Zone patrol before she completed her mission made no sense, especially when the new assignment was little more than a star mapping exercise. What, Kirk wondered, was Mendez doing? Trying to make Kirk look bad, but how? And why now?

The captain got up from the console, making his way to the center seat. He was looking over the fuel consumption report handed him by the yeoman on duty when Sulu asked, "Course change, Captain?"

Kirk looked at the helmsman, annoyed. It was not Sulu's place to ask for orders, and Sulu knew it.

"Steady as she goes, Mr. Sulu," Kirk said quietly as he signed his initials. He would deal with Sulu later. Perhaps the security chief considered that his

captain was getting a little soft. Kirk promised himself Sulu would soon discover the fallacy of such reasoning.

Chief Engineer Scott arrived on the bridge to check on a reported malfunction of one of the monitors on the engineering station. Kirk nodded slightly in his direction as Scott tapped one indicator with his finger and, displeased with the reading, tapped it again. He called Engineering and asked for a corroborating readout, shaking his head at the answer.

"I'll have to pull out this whole panel, Captain. The dilithium crystal status indicator is not registering properly."

"How long will it take Mr. Scott?"

"Not long. I can start repairs immediately and have it finished for you before the midpoint in Delta shift."

"Do so, then," Kirk ordered. "Oh, and who reported the malfunction?" Kirk asked.

"Why, it was the first officer, Captain. Said he discovered the irregularity during a routine inspection of all bridge stations," Scott answered.

"And, of course, Mr. Spock informed you immediately." Kirk paused a moment before asking, "Why wasn't I informed, Mr. Scott? Surely the captain should be made aware of equipment failure, especially on the bridge."

"But you signed the report, Captain. I saw it myself when it arrived in Engineering."

"Of course, Mr. Scott. I must have missed it."

Kirk signed a great number of reports, but he made certain he knew what he was signing. Too many others had lost position due to hastily scrawled signatures. There had been no report of any malfunction of bridge equipment. None. Kirk got up to do a little inspecting of his own. He knew the report would confirm Scott's story. Now it was a matter of deciding who was in a position to alter the original report and what was to be gained by doing so.

Scott left the bridge only to return quickly with his assistant DeSalle, and the two of them set about repairing the faulty indicator. Any other chief engineer in the Fleet would have assigned a junior officer or crewman to the task, but Scott like to work on the bridge equipment himself.

"The bridge," he was fond of saying, "is the nerve center, and if I do the work, I'll know it's done right."

Sulu was getting nervous. The presence of Scott and his assistant on the bridge was a factor he had not counted on. The chief engineer would side with the captain, as would DeSalle. But the first officer was not present, and though his continued absence would guarantee his accession to the captaincy, it lessened the odds in Kirk's favor. When the captain ordered Marlina Moreau to the bridge to replace the missing science officer, Sulu relaxed. She had yet to avenge herself on Kirk, who had tossed her out of his cabin for the enjoyment of the crew. No, she wouldn't lift a finger to help Kirk. Sulu was confident the captain would not survive long.

Spock went directly from Kirk's office to the laboratory, immediately dismissing Sepah.

"I have made this room secure from monitoring," he told the Klingons. "I will have the captain join me here shortly to demonstrate a new experiment he wishes to try, linking this device with the one in his cabin. When activated, both will be destroyed. I have coded all that I know of the device on this computer chip. When the captain tests the device, you will attack using your phasers to stun us, steal this tape and make good your escape."

"And what's to prevent your security people from stopping us?" Koloth asked.

"They will be busy elsewhere. A plan by several junior officers to kill the captain has been discovered, and while you are making your escape, Security will be attempting to discover the identity of the leaders."

"I should not like to command an Imperial ship, whatever her advantages," Koloth admitted. "Your methods of promotion do not encourage command stability."

"And I, no doubt, would find service in the Klingon fleet equally unpleasant." Spock admitted.

The Vulcan made several adjustments to the Tantalus Field before walking over the control panel, hesitating for the briefest second before calling the Bridge.

"Kirk here."

"If you would join me, Captain, I believe it might prove of interest."

"Of course, Mr. Spock. I'll be right there."

Kirk was halfway to the laboratory when McCoy joined him from a side corridor, surprising Kirk's personal guard.

"Watch how you make that entrance, Doctor. You almost met your great, great grandparents."

McCoy scoffed. "Your people are too well trained to make that kind of mistake."

"My people are trained to protect me from whatever appears to be dangerous with no questions asked afterwards, even if they kill the chief medical officer."

McCoy shrugged, certain that Kirk would not let anything happen to the one person he trusted to do the necessary repair work from time to time.

"Mind if I tag along?" McCoy asked as he continued to pace Kirk's steps.

"Doesn't it bother you not to have a private guard?" Kirk asked, suddenly envious of the doctor's freedom of movement.

"Not in the least. You have a private guard who will avenge your death. If they didn't, no one would take them on afterwards and they'd not only lose the extra credits, they'd probably lose their life. So, you're guaranteed they will carry out their oaths if something does happen to you. But, if something should happen to me or to any member of the medical corps, the individual responsible as well as any crewman employed, would bleed to death before medical aid would be rendered. It's a very effective deterrent. We're more important to everyone alive."

"You wouldn't consider lending some of that protective cover, would you?" Kirk asked with a grin, but McCoy detected a note of seriousness beneath the jest.

"Trouble?"

"Nothing I can't handle, Doctor," Kirk replied stiffly.

"Of course, Captain," McCoy agreed.

They reached the research laboratory and entered, the escort remaining outside.

Kirk took mental note of the two guards now stationed inside the laboratory. Spock had not felt it necessary earlier. Did he too share Kirk's feeling of heightened danger?

"Why the guards, Spock? Are you expecting something to happen?"

"Expecting is too strong a word, Captain."

"Talk to me about this later," Kirk said, his attention focused on the duplicate Tantalus Field device.

"How much will this construct increase the range?" he asked.

"Difficult to say, Captain."

"Why? Is there something you're not telling me?" Kirk charged.

"It is always difficult to be precise when speaking of alien technology not yet understood."

McCoy had come over to the table and was inspecting the innocent looking piece of equipment. "Just what is this thing supposed to do?" he asked. "Haven't seen anything like it before."

"It is a device through which the captain hopes to achieve his highest goals," Spock answered.

McCoy was unimpressed. Kirk's goals could only be achieved through the elimination of those superior to him. This piece of equipment was little more than a viewscreen.

Kirk was impatient to start the demonstration, and urged Spock to "get on with it, then."

"I thought it best to see if the combination worked before focusing on a target outside the ship. The guards should prove useful for the first attempt."

Kirk looked directly at the two guards, recognizing them and reaching for his phaser. But, the Klingons had already raised their weapons and fired — first at Kirk who took the stun of two phasers and went down immediately. Seeking separate targets, Korax aimed at the doctor, while Koloth fired at Spock, who had somewhat tardily activated the Tantalus Field, delaying until the Klingons were no longer visible in the targeting monitor.

With the Imperial officers unconscious, Koloth led the way into the corridor, taking precious seconds to activate the door's locking mechanism and then destroy it. It would be a while before any one entered that particular room.

The two Klingons marched briskly down the corridor toward the turbolift, their route to the hangar deck and escape — or even more likely, death.

The lift arrived after a short, but nervous wait, and they were headed for the shuttlecraft bay.

"Did you get the tape?" Koloth asked.

Korax stiffened immediately. "I shall return, Commander," he declared.

"No," Koloth snapped. "Knowledge of the device is sufficient, especially since we are aware of its weaknesses. Perhaps that will be enough — that and a well placed word or two within the Imperial hierarchy should do as much to control Kirk and his ambitions as possession of the tape." He did not point out that the door to the laboratory was inoperative and a return would be futile.

There were guards outside the hangar deck doors, but seeing members of their own unit approach this close to change of shift, they hesitated a moment too long before questioning, and were soon being dragged unconscious into the bay and stuffed into a small room equipped with airtight doors.

The Klingons boarded the shuttlecraft. Neither had ever seen this type of Imperial vessel, but Koloth hoped that somehow desperation would provide the knowledge needed to accomplish their escape.

"Hurry," he urged as Korax studied the various controls. "By now they will be alerted to our entry into this area and will be taking steps to prevent our escape."

Koloth hit a series of switches and the small craft's instrument panel came to life. Now, if they could only discover how the small ship operated and make good their escape.

In the laboratory, the acrid smell of burning circuits from the now charred and smoking Tantalus device brought Spock to consciousness. Confirmation of the destruction of the original model would necessarily have to wait until Kirk returned to his cabin. McCoy was already stirring and Spock went to assist him. Kirk, hit by twin phaser blasts, lay motionless.

The doctor shook off Spock, steadied himself for a moment against the table, then made his way over to the captain's prone body. Spock's attention was on the ruined Tantalus Field when he saw the forgotten computer tape and slipped it into his sash.

The communications panel came to life. "This is the bridge. Security to shuttlecraft deck. Unauthorized entry. Red Alert. Security to shuttlecraft deck." Sulu was calling out the troops, fully aware he would be held responsible, whatever the nature of the emergency.

At the sound of the Red Alert, Kirk quickly shook off the diminishing effects of the phaser blast and pushed Spock away from the com panel.

"This is the captain. What the devil's going on, Sulu?"

"Sir, unauthorized entry into the hangar deck. I've sent security to investigate."

"It's the Klingons," Kirk shouted, "trying to escape."

"The shuttle bay has been depressurized and the doors are opening," Sulu reported.

"Override from the bridge," Kirk barked.

A pause, then, "Override inoperative, Captain."

"Get somebody to auxiliary control and override from there, but prevent that launch." Kirk banged his fist against the wall. Was he surrounded by idiots? He headed for the door, barely noting the charred remains on the lab table. The others followed only to be stopped by the locked door.

"Put a hole through that," Kirk snapped and Spock pulled out his phaser and blasted out the door, also incapacitating Kirk's personal guard stationed outside.

Kirk led the way to the turbolift, calling down curses on the heads of all involved in the Klingon escape and promising long tours in the agony booth.

The shuttle craft launched just as Kirk reached the hangar deck where two crewman were unsuccessfully attempting to close the the bay doors. Kirk ordered both of them to the booth.

On the bridge, Sulu had little time to regret lost opportunity. He was targeting the shuttlecraft with the ship's main phasers.

Kirk's voice sounded through the intercom. "Sulu, lock phasers on the shuttle craft and fire. I want that ship destroyed!"

"Targeting now, Captain. Firing phasers." Sulu was confident. He had performed this same maneuver hundreds of times. He didn't miss, not at this range. But as the phaser fire touched the small craft, screens which should have buckled held. A disbelieving Sulu fired again, this time with all the power he could channel into the phasers, but still the screens held.

Chekov, next to him, was openly contemptuous. Sulu readied proton torpedoes, loosing a barrage at the fleeing craft. He fired just as the small ship went sub-light, the torpedoes speeding harmlessly through space so recently occupied by the shuttlecraft.

Sulu pounded the console before him. Kirk still lived, still commanded the Enterprise, and he would make life particularly unpleasant after today's failures.

Next to Sulu, Chekov saw promotion for himself as an unexpected bonus to this afternoon's work. Surely the weapons operation would be transferred to him. Chekov excelled in targeting, and his firing time reaction ranked among the highest in the fleet. He could almost taste the thrill of having an enemy vessel on the screen, feel the firing button beneath his finger. Chekov licked his lips in anticipation. He would be a senior weapons specialist who enjoyed his work very much.

Uhura had watched Sulu's performance with calculating cynicism. Obviously the phasers had been sabotaged in some way. Sulu didn't miss, not at point blank range, but that would not stop the captain from making an example of the chief helmsman. Chekov would see himself becoming Weapons Officer and perhaps even Security Chief. Uhura, however, would stay where she was, at the center of communications. Only the captain and first officer had access to more information. Uhura intended to make good use her position in order to further her command ambitions.

Scott, busy checking and rechecking power levels, mentally scratched his head at the failure of the ship's main phaser bank to damage the shuttlecraft. It should have disintegrated with the first salvo. His staff was already tearing out panels to trace circuits and locate the problem. Kirk would want to know just what had happened and Scott was the one he was going to ask.

At the science station, Marlena unobtrusively keyed the computer command, restoring full power to the Enterprise's phasers and then, smiling slightly, swiveled around to enjoy the discomfort of the bridge crew. Kirk would make mincemeat of them.

Aboard the shuttlecraft, the Klingon officers watched as the small ship executed a series of computer controlled course changes on impulse power, followed immediately by a return to warp speed.

"I am relieved, Commander, that we did not have to learn to operate the controls of this ship before launch or we would still be aboard the Enterprise."

"We would have been successful," Koloth snapped. "We are Klingons!" he added, using one of Korax' favorite slogans.

"Yes, my commander!"

"And I hope the Vulcan has done a good job of it," Koloth added just as a small viewscreen activated.

"Commander Koloth," Spock's image intoned, "I have programmed this craft to take you to the neutral zone, where you will be able to make contact with your ship. I rely on you to carry out the rest of your mission, advising your government of the potential danger of the Tantalus Field and devising appropriate counter measures. Spock out." The screen image faded.

"So," Koloth commented. "We just sit back and enjoy the ride." He tossed a small computer tape in the air, casually catching it again. "And, how, I wonder, did he manage to beam this tape aboard just before we went sublight? He couldn't have known you would leave it behind." Koloth set the tape down on the console before him. "Perhaps he planned for every contingency — even his own failure," he speculated. "I hear Vulcans prefer their own death rituals to those imposed by others."

Kirk surveyed the gaping hole in the wall of his quarters where the Tantalus Field had resided, his knuckles white in clenched fists. He knew an anger greater than any he had experienced before. That anger required victims, and he had many to choose from.

"Spock," he said, his voice so low only Vulcan ears could hear him, "I want them all, every single member of this crew that allowed them to escape. Question everyone, starting with the bridge crew — starting with Sulu — and go through the whole crew if you have to, but find me those traitors to the Empire. I want their death screams piped through the entire ship so that everyone will know their fate."

"Captain, you are allowing your anger over the destruction of the Tantalus Field to obscure other issues. You no longer have the security that device provided. I would suggest you employ standard disciplinary procedures. They should prove effective, and it is what the crew will expect. Should you increase the harshness of the punishment, there will be speculation concerning the reason for it — and that could prove a more difficult problem. As for Starfleet Command, it may yet be possible to present the escape into a positive light."

Kirk started to pace the cabin. "Without the Tantalus Field—" he began, but Spock interrupted him.

"Without the Tantalus Field you are still James T. Kirk, Captain of the ISS Enterprise. The Tantalus Field was merely a tool. It is your intellect and cunning that won you this ship and secured its many successes since that time."

Kirk stopped, considering the words so soothing to his ego.

"Tell me, Spock," he reflected, "how would my counterpart have handled this situation? He has the same abilities I possess. How would he have dealt with traitors and assassins aboard his Enterprise?"

"He would not have had to, Captain."

"And, why not?" Kirk demanded, his tone now harsh.

"Because, Captain, he would not have found himself in this situation. You are mirror images confronting different realities. His relationships with his crew and his universe preclude such eventuality."

"Spock!"

Kirk would tolerate no more Vulcan philosophical lectures, but Spock would not be rushed. He stood silently assessing Kirk's growing obsession with his counterpart and that counterpart's arguments against the continued existence of the Empire. Perhaps Kirk was finally succumbing to that particular paranoia, symptomatic of starship command. Until now, Kirk had seemed immune, but now Spock

wondered if Kirk had just managed to hide it better. With the destruction of the Tantalus Field Kirk was feeling increasingly vulnerable, a situation which could be made to work against the Empire. Spock choose his words carefully.

"In him, strength is tempered by compassion, aggressiveness ruled by justice, passion governed by intellect. Where you command obedience through fear, he has earned the respect and loyalty of his crew. You order, he leads. You each share the aloneness of command, but where you are always apart, he can relax among his staff, enjoy their companionship.

"There are also significant differences in other's perception of him. His crew now only respect him, they care about him. One even offered to stay behind to allow that James T. Kirk to return to his own universe. I would estimate that there is no one aboard this vessel, save your personnel guard, who would do the same. That is the primary difference between you. They care for him and he for them. He would never need to take steps to protect himself from them.

"He returns their concern. I am alive only because he allowed his Dr. McCoy to treat a head wound he himself had inflicted, commenting that I was 'like' his Mr. Spock."

"Are they all so weak then, that they must lean on each other?" Kirk asked, ignoring his own dependency on personal guards.

"They do not consider it a weakness, but a strength."

"I should kill you for what you have told me."

"Indeed, Captain, but I was merely providing you the information you sought."

With an a curse, the Kirk turned away. Damn it, he needed Spock and the Vulcan knew it. Kirk knew a growing helplessness. How long could he last now? Spock said he commanded from strength and intellect. Perhaps he was correct. One thing was certain — they would soon discover the truth of that statement. How many on the ship wished him dead? It would not do to think about the enemies he had made.

Gathering inner strength, Kirk forced his thoughts toward more immediate problems. He pointed toward the wall where the Tantalus Field had been. "Can you build another?"

"Doubtful, Captain. I was never able to solve the metallurgy problems."

"Rebuild it, anyway. Someday we'll have the right metals and then —" He didn't continue, but Spock could read the obsession that drove his captain. Kirk waved him away. "Get out of here, Spock. I have to consider my report to Starfleet Command."

"Captain!" Spock said, lifting his arm in salute, turned precisely and left James T. Kirk alone — with his doomed plans for universal conquest.





Mind-Slave

by

Anne B. Collins D.V.M.

Spock had been beaten—again.

How bad is it this time? was the only thought in Kirk's mind as he rose tensely from where he'd been sitting on the floor near the door of the brig cell.

Spock stepped into the cell, rigid with the tight control he had assumed over the last two days. The inner force field door flashed into existence behind him. Kirk tried to assess the cuts, bruises, and swellings he could see. It didn't seem as bad as the other times, though since there wasn't nearly enough time for healing between bouts, the only direction to go was worse.

Then Spock turned to face him, and Kirk looked straight into horror.

One eye—the left, which Kirk couldn't see before—was out of its socket. It bulged obscenely, crossed by grossly distended green veins. The normally glistening surface was already milky gray and drying. It looked huge, especially since the other eye was almost hidden behind swollen bruises.

"Lord Almighty," breathed McCoy. "You'll lose it if I don't get it back in—and soon. Can you relax the lids?"

"Affirmative. But it will take a few minutes. Let me lie down." Kirk and McCoy backed up, motioning to the other officers to make room in the crowded cell. Someone was retching into the toilet. Spock carefully got down on hands and knees, then rolled only his back, blank eye staring sightlessly. "Begin the attempt in five minutes. Count your pulse if you have to."

"Right. Uhura, you can do that. Find your pulse and count—oh, eighty beats per minute. That's a little fast, but we're all excited."

"Yes, Doctor. I'm starting now."

"I'll need water." McCoy looked around. Several officers grabbed the soft plastic bowls which were the only objects permitted them, and went to the water nipple, which with the toilet constituted the only furnishings of the cell.

Kirk knelt by Spock and looked across at McCoy. "Can you do it, Bones?"

"Maybe. Probably. Damn it, I don't know. It all depends on how much he can relax his eyelids. I should be using an anesthetic to get total relaxation. He'll have to relax on his own, in spite of the pain. You know that an eye can't be replaced."

Kirk nodded. He found himself staring at the eye, though his stomach churned in revulsion. He realized he could see the muscles that normally moved the eye, where they attached to the widest part of the orb. The turgid vessels were becoming a sickly olive color. A trickle of brighter blood seeped from the corner and ran down his temple into his hair.

McCoy dipped his fingers in a bowl of water and, with infinite caution, began wetting the exposed cornea.

With nothing to do for the moment, Kirk once again found his thoughts in a hopeless tangle of self-recrimination. He remembered bitterly how proud he had been when he evaded the trap set by the Romulans near the neutral zone. But the trap had been two-fold. When the ambush didn't succeed, an energy damping field was waiting on their most probable course to Starbase 21. They'd run right into it. And now here they were, captured, with no chance to destroy the ship. The senior officers and department heads were confined in the two brig cells. The rests were locked in their stripped quarters or herded together in the rec or dining rooms. A prize crew, borrowed from the crews of the three ships that had laid the damper field, was taking the Enterprise to Romulus. They were limping on impulse drive only, the warp drive blown by the damper.

Spock and McCoy had both tried to convince him that there was no way he could have predicted the second part of the trap. But some guilty voice deep inside himself kept whispering, "If only you'd done something else."

Once underway, the Romulans had never paid any attention to their Human prisoners, except to provide the minimum care necessary to ensure that they would be in good shape on arrival. But Spock had fascinated them. Several times each day they had removed him, and returned him each time more bloodied and sprained and bruised and swollen. Kirk had wondered if they could be testing his physique, to see if he were as tough as a Romulan. But Spock had insisted they were testing his character, hoping to drive him to fight back or cower. Instead, he explained he was calling upon the patience of Vulcan, which told him that either he would survive the beatings, in which case they were endurable by definition, or he would not survive, in which case the pain would end.

Uhura called off the minutes as they passed. McCoy kept the eye moist. Finally, it was time.

"Hold his head steady, Jim. You help too, Sulu." McCoy carefully wet his hands again as Kirk and Sulu braced Spock's head. Resting one palm on his cheek, the other on his forehead, he touched wet fingers to the glistening eye. He arranged all ten fingers on top of the eye and started applying pressure. Kirk felt the push trying to turn Spock's head in his hands and pulled harder the other way. McCoy pushed steadily, ever harder, his fingers quivering with tension.

Suddenly the eye gave. It disappeared inward so abruptly that McCoy cracked his knuckles together. Spock's head jerked in Kirk's hands, from the sudden release of pressure. He and Sulu eased their holds. McCoy dribbled water over the area and sluiced some blood away. The lids, though swollen and green with new bruising, looked blessedly normal covering the eye.

McCoy finally sat back, straightened out his legs with a grimace, and rubbed his knees. "That's it. He may be all right now."

"But you don't know." Kirk looked around at the circle of anxious, watching faces.

"No. But I don't think the nerve separated. All the muscles looked intact. There wasn't much bleeding, so the major blood vessels are probably OK. Everything's stretched and strained, but he can recover." He felt for Spock's pulse. "I hope he'll permit himself at least a light trance." His voice lowered to a bitter tone. "And that they'll let him stay in it for a while."

"Why should they?" Kirk felt anger taking over. "They did it. They'll give no—no time-outs for what they did deliberately."

"I doubt if they intended it." McCoy's voice edged back toward clinical detachment. "It was probably an accident—almost certainly an unlikely combination of blows to the head. I hate to be defending them, but they did return him—which gave us a chance."

Kirk nodded, too angry to voice agreement with McCoy's less harsh opinion. So, the immediate crisis was over. But every glance at his Vulcan friend reminded Kirk of the other injuries inflicted. Most likely, the beatings would continue. And the same, or more efficient methods, awaited them all when they arrived at Romulus.

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They all looked up when they heard footsteps approaching in the corridor. Kirk was surprised to see Spock stepping through the two force fields, rigged up air-lock fashion, that secured the doorway. It was by far the shortest time that Spock had been kept out of the cell—and he showed no visible sign of fresh abuse. Kirk let the tension ease out of him in a sigh.

"What did they do, Spock? How are you?" In a way, Kirk found it a relief to have to ask. Always before, it had been far too obvious what had happened, the story written on Spock's body.

"I have no further injuries, Captain, Doctor," he addressed them both. "Instead, I have a proposal to relay to you. It requires a command decision, and I recommend I speak with the Captain alone." McCoy nodded and stepped back.

Spock waved toward a corner of the cell, then steered Kirk that way with a hand on his shoulder. Kirk was so amazed at the gesture, he almost forgot to move in the direction indicated. Spock rarely touched Humans when it could be avoided. His telepathic sensitivity made him feel "inundated" by Human emotions, so chaotic compared to Vulcan. Spock sat on the floor in the corner and Kirk settled down facing him, knee to knee. The others, with McCoy, tried to give them what privacy was possible by moving to the other half of the room.

"All right, Spock, what is it?"

Spock leaned forward and spoke softly. "The Romulan first officer has offered to make me his mind-slave. I realize you may not know what this entails."

Spock paused. His eyebrow raised quizzically, inviting a response. Kirk tried to pin down his whirling thoughts.

"I don't have the foggiest idea. Mind-slave? It sounds awful. How bad is it?"

"It is a technique which was used on Vulcan in the time before Surak. As a result of a mind-meld at the deepest possible levels, the weaker or more submissive mind is supplanted by the stronger. Both bodies are then controlled by the victor. It is similar to how the Romulan fleet commander tried to subvert me, when we stole the cloaking device. However, she had the immense disadvantage of being of the opposite gender and finding me unbonded. There is no possibility that the first officer could accomplish it against my resistance. Therefore, I control whether or not to submit. I am under your command; I will not allow this unless you order it."

"Spock—are you saying you could become a traitor? Serve the Romulans as some kind of agent? I can't believe you'd even consider it, much less suggest it to me! With your abilities, you'd be a tremendous asset to them. I can't—I can't believe I understood you correctly." Desperately, Kirk searched the Vulcan's controlled expression for some kind of reassurance.

"You do not yet understand fully." Spock leaned even closer, putting a hand on Kirk's knee. "I would be willing to do this as a means of denying them my abilities. I would make of it the death of my personality. As a mind-slave my brain would become nothing but a reflection of the mind of the conqueror. There is little real advantage in one mind manipulating two bodies. It would confer great status on the

subcommander among his fellow Romulans; that is why he wishes to do it. But it would not provide any remarkable military advantage to the Romulan Empire. My most likely alternative is suicide. They could not keep me alive if I willed myself to die. Of course, I would not do that until it became absolutely necessary. In the meantime, the beatings would resume with increased severity."

Kirk looked down, shaking his head in denial. He couldn't even consider that possibility realistically with Spock's face in front of him. The injured eye was recovering behind closed, bruised lids; the other eye could glimpse a sliver of vision from between swellings. The nose, lips, cheeks and jaw were misshapen, discolored lumps. Spock gripped his shoulder with a firm, steady hand and Kirk met his gaze again. "Spock...as a mind-slave...there would be no more pain?"

"No, Captain. I would not exist as a consciousness to perceive it. And further, the subcommander would certainly take good care of my body, for he would feel every hurt as his own. I admit that this is one major reason I would do this. You are deeply distressed by my suffering, as are the others here." Spock nodded toward the crowd of officers, respectfully waiting across the room. "I would remove this source of anguish from you. And when you see my injuries, your untrained minds pour out their disturbance at me in this over-occupied cell. That stress is a continuing drain on me. Therefore I recommend you accept the subcommander's offer."

Kirk nodded slightly, his attention riveted on the face so close to his own. Despite the swelling, Spock's eye seemed to bore right into his brain with the intensity of its gaze. Kirk thought he had never before been so aware of the essential alienness of Spock. Gone was the cooperative co-worker who let Uhura sing silly songs about him. This Vulcan was dealing with his own life and death--and duty. And he wanted this. Suddenly, Kirk was sure of it. Spock wanted to take the offer. And with that knowledge came decision. Not all the gold braid in Starfleet could give Kirk the right to deny Spock this clean death.

He nodded again, more firmly. Spock relaxed, easing his grip on Kirk's shoulder. He dropped his head and took a deep breath, as if he had been straining. Then he met Kirk's eyes again. Kirk smiled fondly, putting his hand over Spock's in a sudden rush of sorrow.

"Do what you have to, Spock."

"Acknowledged, Captain." Though Spock's word were formal, he did not remove his hand.

"Can you try to tell the others...what will happen?" Kirk inclined his head to the waiting Humans.

"Of course, Captain."

They stood, and faced the group. But then they all heard the heavy clumping of boots in the corridor. A Romulan appeared beyond the force fields, followed by several others. Kirk recognized the weave of the shoulder-drape as indicating the rank of subcommander. So this was the instrument of Spock's death. Kirk found himself unable to hate the man. He'd had nothing directly to do with the beatings; that had been the work of junior officers. The Romulan first officer was tall, lean, and confident--not totally unlike Spock. And though he had made his offer out of a desire for personal gain, still Kirk could not hate him.

"Come, Spock." His deep voice was translated in Kirk's implant. Obviously he had been observing them with the brig's monitors, which could pick up the faintest whisper and reveal the slightest gesture. He would not permit a long leave-taking, which was probably just as well; the scene would surely be wearing on Spock.

"Good bye, Spock," Kirk said simply.

"Good bye, Jim," Spock said, finally switching to the personal name. Then he addressed the other captives. "And farewell to you all." He stepped immediately through the inner force field. It sprang into being, and he stepped unhesitatingly through the second field and strode away with the Romulan.

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With Spock's innate time-sense gone, it was impossible to know just how long it was before the prisoners were visited again. They were fed twice, and most of them slept at least once, so it was probably most of a solar day later when the sound of boots brought them to alertness. Two male Romulans appeared, both of the high-intermediate rank of subcommander. They stepped through the outer force field. Kirk was surprised, for no Romulan had previously entered the cell. They realized that one of the officer was Spock. The fields shifted, and they entered the cell.

Kirk stepped forward. He noted how they moved together, taking steps at the same time, standing with the same attitude, which was subtly different from Spock's. Spock's face was vastly improved. The bruises had cleared and the swelling was much reduced. The less injured eye appeared normal, and even the damaged one seemed functional, though bloodshot. Those results could only have been obtained in Sickbay. Kirk wondered who the nurses had thought they were treating.

Kirk took a deep breath as he waited to find out the reason or the visit.

"Your officer has been converted," said the Romulan. His voice was loud and victorious. Kirk realized he had come to gloat.

"This body now serves the Praetor of the glorious Romulan Empire!" The words came from Spock's mouth, but the tone was arrogant, totally unlike him. "I will be a symbol of the weakness of the Federation for a hundred years!"

Suddenly, Spock's body stepped forward. A mighty slap threw Kirk off his feet, into the Humans behind him. They barely managed to grab him in time to prevent him from falling to the floor. He put his hand to his cheek—which felt numb, like it wasn't there—and waited through a wave of dizziness. Finally he got his feet under him and the others let go. Spock was looming right in front of him, head thrust forward aggressively, fists balled. Every line of his taut body was begging Kirk to fight back.

Kirk straightened carefully, slowly. "Thank you," he said gently.

The Romulan's confusion showed plainly on Spock's face. "Why do you thank me?"

"Now I know Spock is dead. You cannot hurt him any more. It is what I gave him permission to do, and I'm glad it's done. My friend died in the performance of his duty." Kirk forced himself to gaze into the familiar eyes steadily.

Spock's body stepped back until it was alongside the subcommander again. Kirk noted that the Romulan's body had not moved while Spock's was active. Apparently, the Romulan's mind could not give full attention to both bodies at once. If one body was distracted, perhaps the other could be overcome. But it was unlikely the opportunity would arise. Already the two bodies were backing together into the doorway. The inner field flicked on, and they strode away down the corridor.

* * *

Time drifted into a confused blur for the prisoners. The light was always the same, their meals came at irregular intervals, and they each slept when they felt like it, some sooner than others. Kirk organized calisthenics, and they all accepted the necessity of maintaining fitness, but they knew that muscle power was unlikely to be much help against the technology available to the Romulans.

They talked endlessly. Kirk explained what he knew about Spock's situation, his...loss. He told them what Spock had said, but felt reluctant to try to describe the intensely personal mental touch which had contributed to his decision. He knew that Romulans could be listening in at any time, and did not want them to know quite how relieved Spock had been to be able to neutralize his value to the Empire. The way Spock had spoken, as if he were being forced to recommend an undesirable action, now reminded Kirk of Bre'r Rabbit and the briar patch.

They discussed tactics, but the result kept coming up that unless the Romulans made a really ridiculous mistake, they had no hope. They took to sharing memories of their lives before their capture, singing songs, playing games that required no equipment, such as 'blindfold' chess.

They knew they had arrived at their destination when they felt the gravity shift from ship's internal to an external source. Conversation died, and they waited...and waited.

It must have been several hours later that they heard boots approaching. They stood tensely as the dual bodies of the subcommander approached. He stepped into the door-lock, and turned off the inner force field without engaging the outer. Kirk read bitterly the confidence of that action. The subcommander was telling them there was no escape. The two bodies took identical strides into the cell.

"Commander Spock, reporting for duty," came impossibly from Spock's mouth. "Welcome to Starbase 21."

"What? Spock?" Kirk stepped close, searching his eyes, gripping his arms. The sense of Spock's presence hit him like a soft avalanche, and he grabbed him in a bear hug and pressed him close, cheek against his shoulder. Spock permitted the embrace, but Kirk felt the presence of his mind fade and vanish as normal barriers were erected again. Kirk stepped back, releasing his friend reluctantly.

McCoy had also stepped forward, examining Spock with clinical scrutiny. Spock responded with the familiar eyebrow lift. McCoy broke into a grin which Kirk found himself returning. "He's alive, Jim," said McCoy, in unconscious parody of himself. "But how, Spock? We thought you were gone for good."

"I used the technique taught me by Sargon and Thalassa to lie undetected in a brain controlled by another. For most of two days I remained completely passive, almost unthinking. The subcommander and the other Romulans became convinced that I was indeed dead and ceased taking precautions. So, the next time he was alone in his quarters, I took him over. Then I mutinied against the captain. This was not seen as suspicious, for it is a recognized means of advancement, and tolerated if the mission is not endangered. I simply lured the captain into briefing room two and used my superior knowledge of the computer to trap him there. I took over all navigation and communication myself, and set course for Star Base 21. Since our arrival, I have been cautiously isolating and stunning the prize crew. I have turned over the last mop-up to Starbase Security, for I wished to release you before the rest of the crew. You can get fresh uniforms at Sickbay, just down the corridor."

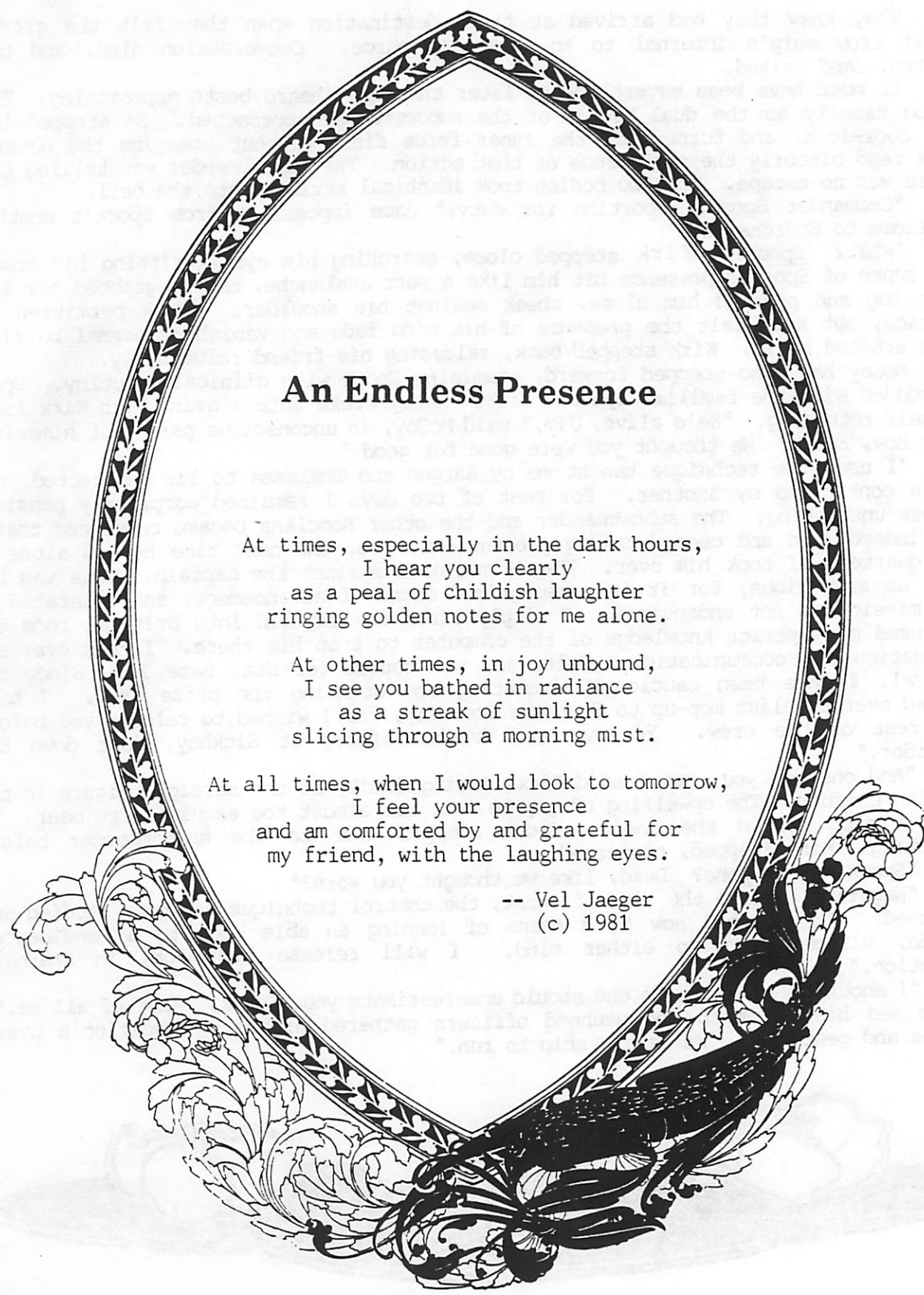
"And one for you, too," said Kirk, gazing fondly at the straight figure in the Romulan uniform. The upwelling of joy he felt was almost too exquisite to bear. He took a step toward the door. Spock stepped over to the subcommander before following. Kirk stopped, concerned.

"Spock, is he gone? Dead, like we thought you were?"

"Negative. Since the time of Surak, the control technique has been studied and improved. It is used now as a means of loaning an able body to a handicapped person, without harm to either mind. I will release him soon, in Starbase detention."

"I should have known. No one should underestimate you, Spock, least of all me." He raised his voice to the stunned officers gathered around. "Vacation's over, ladies and gentlemen. We have a ship to run."





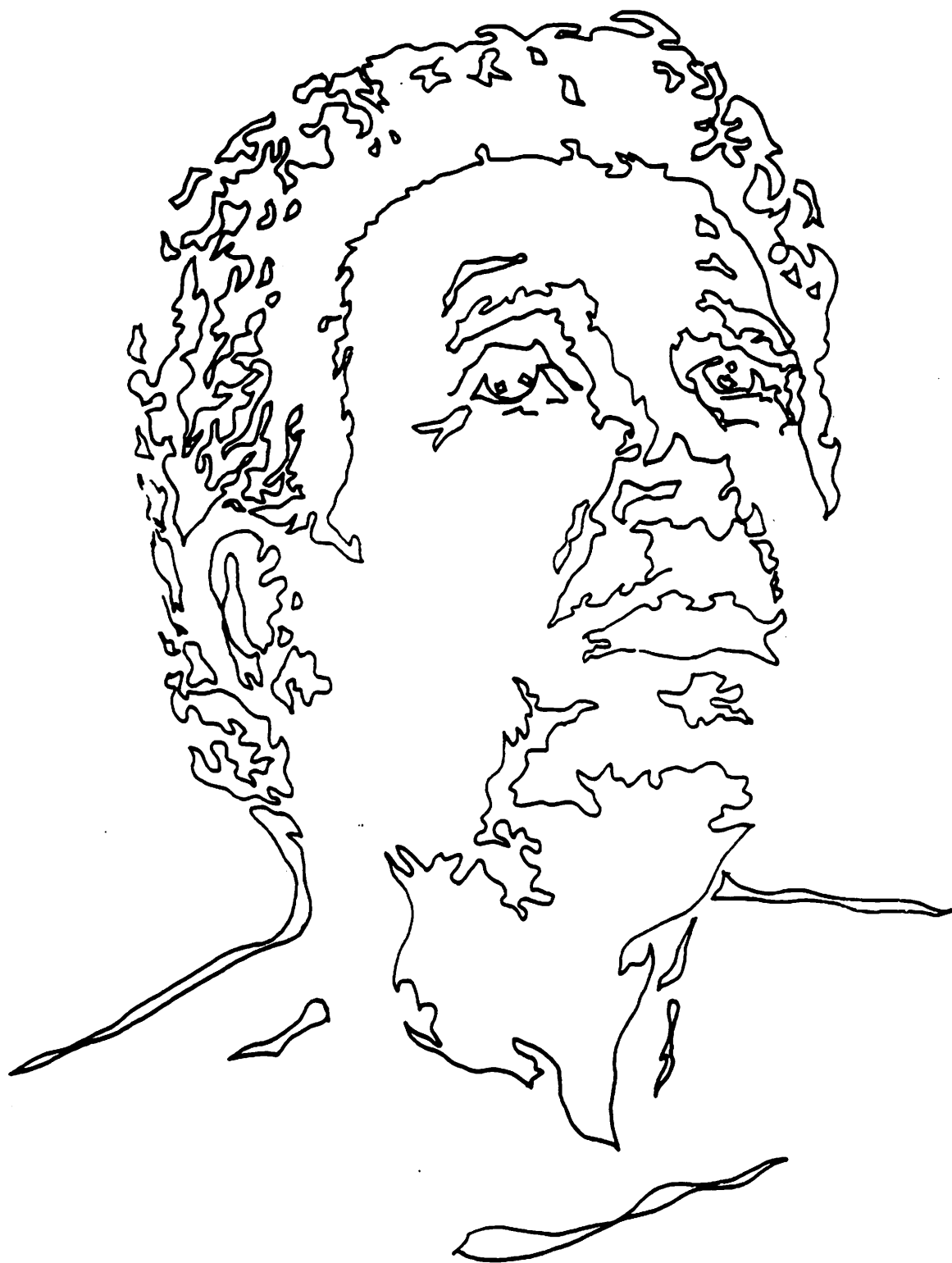
An Endless Presence

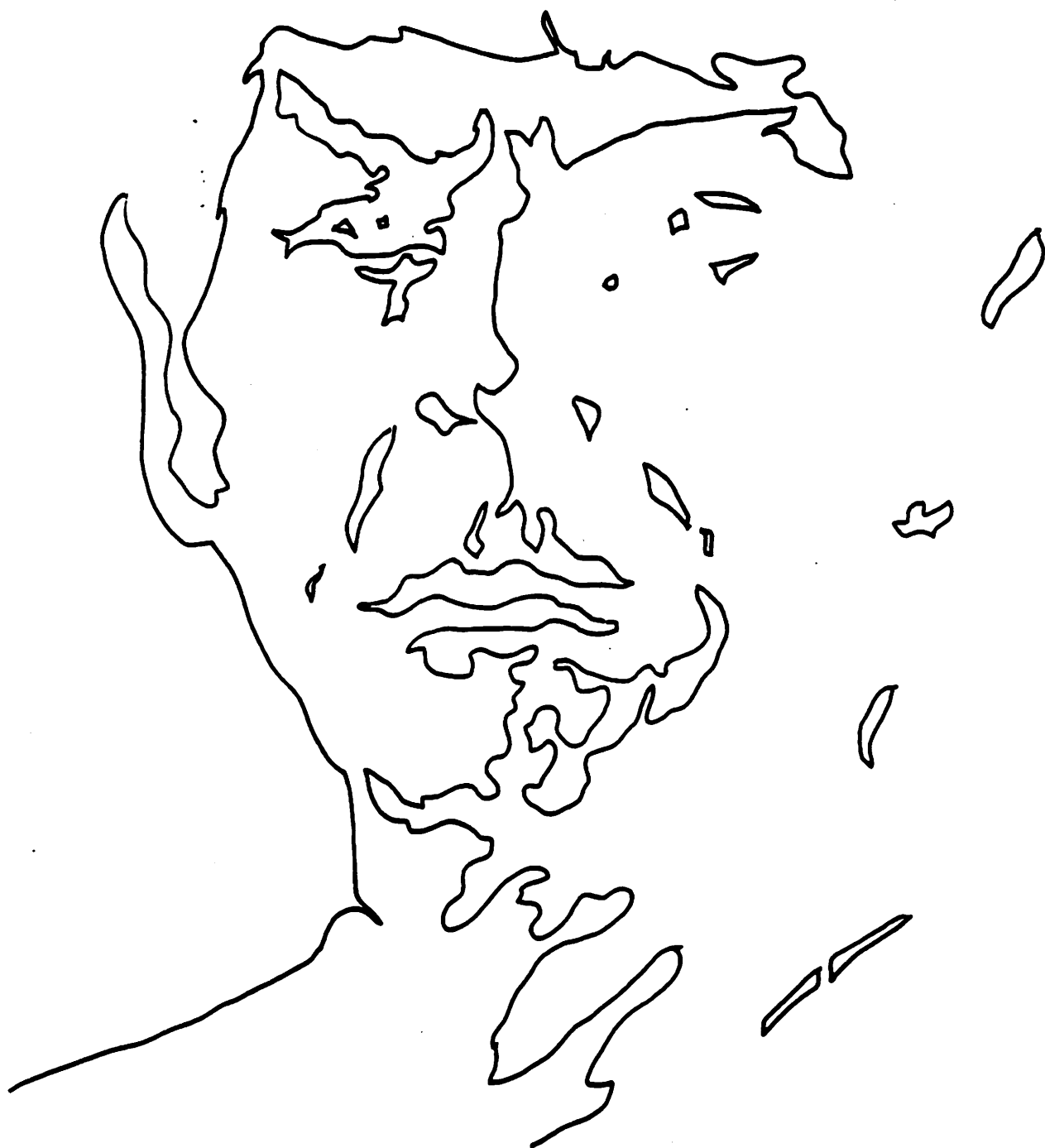
At times, especially in the dark hours,
I hear you clearly
as a peal of childish laughter
ringing golden notes for me alone.

At other times, in joy unbound,
I see you bathed in radiance
as a streak of sunlight
slicing through a morning mist.

At all times, when I would look to tomorrow,
I feel your presence
and am comforted by and grateful for
my friend, with the laughing eyes.

-- Vel Jaeger
(c) 1981







A Mortal Stumble

There dwells within our Vulcan
such a feline curiosity,
compelling him ever further,
not seeing warning barriers
that others note with caution.

So entranced is he with
learning, growing, seeking,
that he is often a victim of himself.

And a Vulcan who has stumbled
over his own mortality
is so loveably outrageous
-- so like a cat crawling, mortified,
from the unsuspected depths of a snowbank.

Dignity hopelessly shattered,
he can only gather in his pride,
and pretend he'd planned it so,
all along.

Forgive our laughter,
which we are helpless to smother
-- it stems from love,
not ridicule,
at such endearing evidence
of the humanity you would hide.

-- Vel Jaeger
(c) 1981



When Only Anger Reigns

I know I often joke and ridicule
this maze of plastic, machinery, and potions
with which I ply my healer's trade.

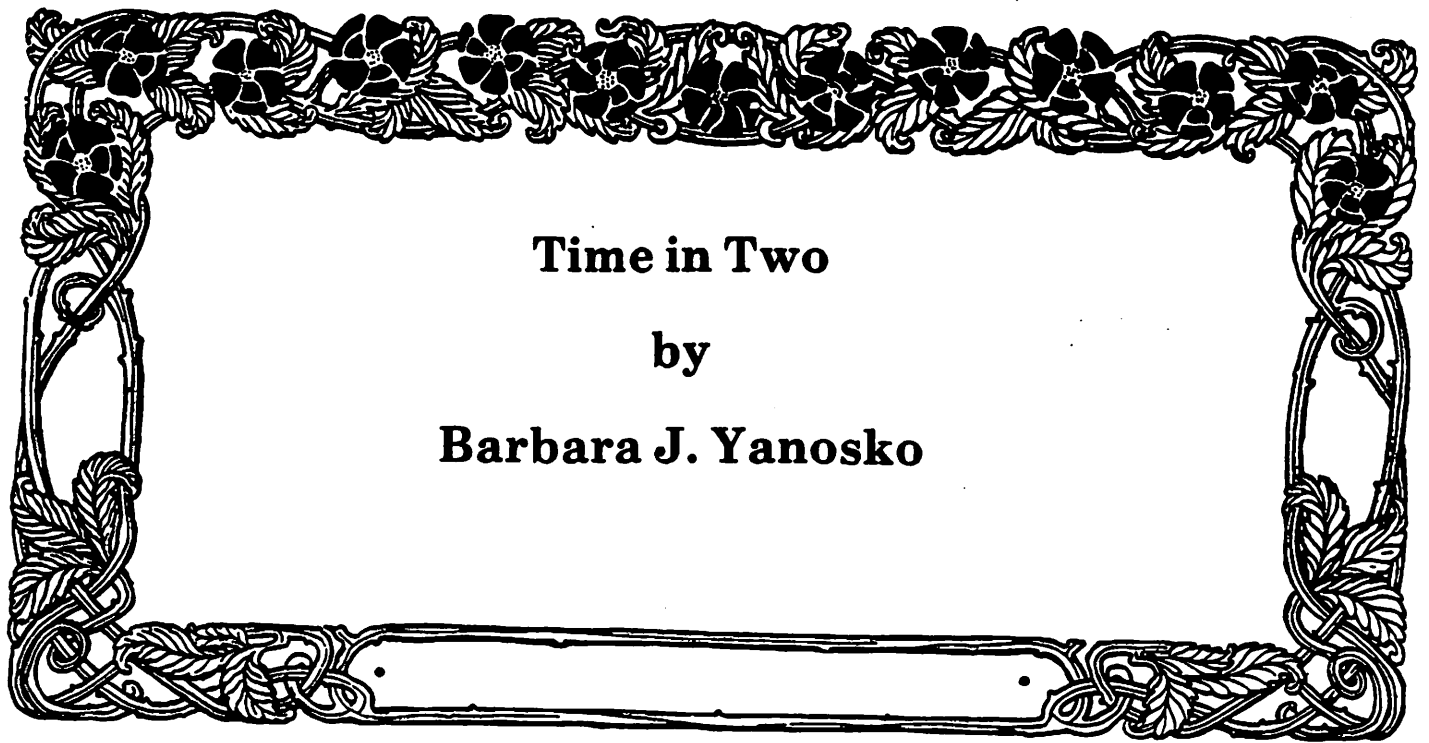
For if truth be known,
my part is miniscule,
and much of that mere noisy, human emotions
to which my art lends aid.

BUT the crisis come, if early or late,
causing eyes to turn, panic-swept,
to me -- as witness vivid stains.

And when I fail,
as often is my fate,
I rage and never grow adept
this day, when only anger reigns.

-- Vel Jaeger
(c) 1981





Time in Two

by

Barbara J. Yanosko

I

The call light flashed for the captain's attention. Glad for the interruption from the stack of forms that could only be termed bureaucratic busywork, he hit the intercom switch. "Yes?"

"Permission to enter, Captain?" familiar dark velvet tones responded.

"Come," he answer rising to meet his friend.

The cabin door slid open, yet the slim figure at the door still hesitated to cross the threshold.

"I am not interrupting anything?" the Vulcan asked.

"Yes, you are, but I welcome this interruption. Please come in, Spock. I had thought you would take advantage of the three weeks of shore leave while the Enterprise was in dry dock. Hadn't you contacted some officials on Vulcan about a research project?" Kirk asked, pushing back from his desk. He realized he was admitting to some snooping into the Vulcan's private affairs, but he did have to approve the deep space call.

"In reality, I have been attempting to reconcile the Vulcan Academy and the bureaucracy of the Starfleet research branch to a small project I have in mind," Spock explained.

"Which one balked?" Kirk asked, noting a slight hesitation in his friend's explanation.

"The Vulcan Academy gave me full clearance immediately," Spock continued.

"...and Starfleet rejected your proposal."

"Most Illogical."

"Where is it written that Starfleet has to be logical?" Kirk responded.

With a rise of one brow and the corners of his mouth Spock said, "Touche."

"I assume you didn't come here to discuss the logic of Starfleet," Kirk continued.

"In fact, I did, Captain. Starfleet has had a change of heart and finally as granted me permission to undertake the research mission."

Kirk's curiosity was aroused as he motioned for Spock to be seated. "We don't need to be formal, Spock. What kind of research—not another trip into the Murasaki Effect?"

"Actually, the research project is that of my ward."

Kirk's mouth dropped open. "Ward?!" he finally squeaked.

"Saavik is finishing her degree at the Vulcan Science Academy. She plans eventually to matriculate to Starfleet Academy for command training," Spock said.

"Ward?" Kirk repeated. "You're responsible for a child?"

"Affirmative, although her parentage is Vulcan-Romulan."

That information stopped Kirk. "How?"

"When she was three, she was abandoned by her Romulan mother on a savage Romulan colony world which was later in turn abandoned. Just before I was assigned to the Enterprise under Captain Pike, I was part of the Vulcan survey team that found her. She was more like a wild animal. Her father was dead, of course, since Romulans do not allow the Vulcan parent to live beyond the third year of the child's life. I tried to locate her relatives on Vulcan, but no one admitted the relationship. Therefore I turned to my own family for assistance. Sarek took the conservative view, but the Lady Amanda—"

"—wouldn't hear of it. That is a great deal of private information, and not your usual style," Kirk added.

"I wish you to understand the nature and rationale of the research. Saavik wishes to study Pre-Reform Vulcan..."

"Why come to me?"

"...through first hand experience."

"The Guardian," Kirk whispered.

Spock nodded. "I have received all clearances necessary. Since she would be conspicuous traveling alone in that time period, I am to accompany her."

"I bet it wasn't easy to get permission to sponsor the research project of a Vulcan/Romulan adolescent. How many accounts did you have to call in?"

Spock shifted uncomfortably. "One should clear debts occasionally," was all that he would admit.

"Isn't it unusual for a historian to wish to undergo command training?" Kirk asked.

"Saavik is fully rated on computer design. The Pre-Reform project is for her thesis. In particular she wishes to research the existence and use of the computer in that time period."

"Where do I come in?" Kirk asked warily.

"We intend to go to the Guardian planet with a small crew and a landing party familiar with the function and danger of the Guardian. I was hoping you would be able to join us, Captain. If you would rather not, Jim, I will understand," Spock said, warm concern shining in his eyes. He had shared in their discovery of the Guardian in that "City on the Edge of Forever" and knew what the venture had cost his friend.

"I wouldn't miss it, Spock, even if we are back-up to a 'wet-behind-the-ears' kid."

"I assure you there is no water about her aural receptors," Spock returned dryly.

"By the way, what is a Vulcan teenager like?"

"She is actually an adolescent of twenty earth years in age. Like all pre-adults she tends to take herself very seriously and to be somewhat rigid," Spock explained.

"Adult Vulcans, of course, do not suffer from any of these traits," Kirk observed, "yourself, for example."

"I have adapted to Human forms, but that may be a taint of my parentage," Spock admitted.

Kirk chuckled. "Who else will be going?"

"Aside from the vessel's crew, there will be Lieutenant Uhura, Lt. Sulu and Dr. McCoy. Mr. Sulu will remain in the ship to monitor activities from there. Uhura and McCoy will beam down with us."

"This is getting better and better—but why do you need a doctor, aside from continuing your traditional feud."

Spock elevated a brow and answered, "Pre-Reform Vulcan was quite savage. I do not anticipate trouble, but I would rather be prepared."

"So you chose the best doctor you could think of."

"He has experience with the Guardian and with Vulcan physiology—a rare combination."

"And he is a good doctor."

"...And he is a good doctor," Spock admitted without further reluctance, "but it would be bad form to tell him I said so."

"Of course," Kirk agreed. Oh, boy, old home week, he thought.

"Will you come, then?" Spock asked.

"Just try and stop me," Kirk answered, already planning the necessary requests and delegations of duties. "When do we leave?"

"In two days."

II

The Beagle was a small, sleek, long-range scout ship designed for research and leased to the Vulcan Academy. Armament was deemed unnecessary in order to accommodate more equipment. The interior was similarly streamlined with crew quarters designed for efficiency and physical comfort rather than psychological ease. The only grumbler on that point was predictably Dr. McCoy. Spock observed philosophically that the ship was also designed for speed so the good doctor would not have to endure the conditions for long. That did not mollify McCoy at all. And what bothered him most was the closet sized sickbay. "Now, don't get sick," he told everyone. "If I could find what I need to cure you in there, I would either not have enough of it or not enough room to use it." Actually, with the crew of five combined with the six researchers/command staff, there was not much danger of either concern.

Spock let Saavik take charge of the ground research operation, which included briefing the members of the landing party. There was an undercurrent of anxiety about upsetting the time line, but no one dared voice that concern. The only caution Saavik insisted on was that the other members of the landing party make no observations through the Guardian while she and Spock conducted their research. Spock had watched Kirk carefully at that announcement, but he had not reacted overtly and Spock had heaved an inward sigh of relief. He was chagrined once again at being so transparent when the captain had whispered to him that Edith was in the past and he would do nothing to jeopardize their future.

Now in orbit around the Guardian planet, the landing party assembled in the transporter area. When Spock and Saavik entered, they commanded everyone's attention.

McCoy let his breath out between his teeth in a low whistle. "Will you look at that, now."

Saavik wore an ankle length white gown caught at the shoulders and the hips — and nowhere else — with golden clasps. On her feet were soft white boots; draped down her back was a long scarlet cape. Her dark hair was piled and coiled into an elaborate coiffure.

"This is a conservative street costume of the period, Doctor," she said evenly.



"Conservative!?" he exclaimed, "What is a daring costume like?"

"Considerably less," she answered succinctly.

"You, on the other hand, look like Don Juan himself," Kirk said to his Vulcan friend.

Spock's outfit consisted of a thigh length white tunic with full sleeves, and a black leather tabbard with a silver crest emblazoned on his chest. Black tights, knee high black boots and a long black cape lined in scarlet completed his costume. Spock had allowed his hair to grow since he had received clearance for the trip. Though maintaining the familiar bangs, the rest was knotted at the nape of his neck, adding to the swashbuckling appearance. However, the items that drew the most attention were the twin daggers positioned in his belt-weapon, the ahn woon.

"Just how dangerous is this trip supposed to be?" McCoy queried.

"There is a point four-nine-five probability that I will be forced to engage in personal combat," Spock admitted.

"Just you remember to get back in few enough pieces for me to put together," McCoy admonished.

"I shall endeavor to come back in one piece," Spock promised.

Gathering their carry bags, Spock stepped to the transporter platform. "Shall we begin?"

Sulu operated the console and five pillars of firelight formed in the alcove and winked out to reform the planet's surface. What a samurai Commander Spock would have made, Sulu thought to himself as he shut down the transporter, even to the proper attitude toward life, death, and honor.

The research group materialized in the clearing before the Guardian, the portal to the past with no clue to its own history. The swirling mists in the center of the roughly donut-shaped stone/metal device were as Kirk remembered them. The ruined city seemed to absorb all noise save the wind rush sound from the portal. This was the best guarded secret of the Federation. Only a handful of people actually knew of its existence and those that were researchers never divulged their source. Kirk realized that Saavik had to be quite special for Spock to even consider getting permission for her to come here, and he had to have been very persuasive to convince Starfleet that the risk was worth it. Saavik herself had to be extraordinary, and Kirk had to admit that in her present attire she was strikingly beautiful. Spock, of course, would not notice such things—or would he? How well he knew Spock, Kirk thought, yet how little he really knew. His alienness was especially apparent in this costume, and he carried it with grace and an undercurrent of power.

Saavik was the first to speak. "We will enter the Guardian in precisely 11.5 minutes. Please synchronize your chronometers. Under no circumstances is anyone to ask for a review of any other history. Lt. Uhura, please be sure to keep a continuous tricorder recording on the Guardian. I do not anticipate anything untoward happening, but a comparison will be a necessary backup."

"I understand and, Saavik, please be careful," Uhura responded maternally. The Vulcan girl reacted with a raise of her left eyebrow. Kirk and McCoy coughed simultaneously behind their hands and even the corners of Spock's mouth twitched.

"Well, Spock," McCoy ventured, changing the subject, "I think you'll have no trouble fitting into a barbaric society; you look like the devil himself."

"Indeed, Doctor, I shall just pretend that all the historical persons are Human and then their behavior or misbehavior will be perfectly comprehensible."

"Seriously, Spock," Kirk broke in, "you can't react in a calmly logical way in a savage society. What are your plans?"

"You have taught me a good strategy for this purpose, Captain—poker. Often the bluff is more effective than the action."

Saavik shot Spock a startled look as Kirk chuckled in understanding. "It is time to address the Guardian," she said tensely.

She's as nervous and excited as a kid on a grand adventure, Kirk thought—and that's exactly what she is.

Spock shouldered the pack containing their supplies after rechecking the order of everything, and stepped with Saavik to the portal.

"Guardian," she called.

The voice from nowhere and everywhere resonated, "A summons; it has been a long wait. Where do you wish to travel?"

"Pre-Reform Vulcan, the city of ShiKahr," Saavik responded.

The mists spun faster until they coalesced into alien images of red sky and fire, then green water, red sand, and finally people, as the centuries rolled on in seconds. Spock and Saavik seemed to hesitate as if waiting for a precise instant and then they ran forward and disappeared.

"Good luck," their companions called after them.

Time was presented for several more minutes to Uhura's tricorder and then dissolved once again into the swirling mists. Now there was nothing left but the wait.

III

Spock and Saavik passed into what momentarily felt like a blast furnace, but the hot, dry climate of the high desert around ShiKahr was a welcome respite. There was no road, nor was the city visible from their location, only unfamiliar barren landscape.

"Which way?" Saavik asked at last.

"I am endeavoring to get a mental direction," Spock said.

"In that case I will be glad to let you lead."

"Remember, your position to my rear is not one of etiquette but rather function. I would not care to be attacked from the rear without warning.

"It is more logical for me to be attacked, then," she shot back.

Spock sighed. "Saavika, I would be glad for you to precede me if it would cause no comment in this time. Your pride in this is nonfunctional and could be dangerous. In public you will obey my word without question or reaction. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Spock," she said curtly.

"Aside from the fact that my role is one of Guardian Male, I do have a good deal of experience in alien cultures, and I have survived."

"But this is barbaric Vulcan. Savagery I can understand."

"And savagery is least forgiving." Spock placed his hand on Saavik's forearm to try to read her state of mind and project acceptance of what must be. As expected, she resisted both his efforts, but slowly relaxed.

"There is still much anger in you," he observed, "The Academy has only polished a few of your edges."

"Much of my life has not been conducive to joy, or even rationality."

"One cannot change the past, and holding this anger will help neither the present nor the future."

"I am quite functional," she retorted.

"Do you wish to have a command position?" Spock asked.

"Yes, you know I do," Saavik returned instantly.

"Then for that reason you must defuse your anger. It can cloud your thinking in critical command decisions."

"How?" she asked simply, resting her head against Spock's shoulder.

"Little one, I cannot give you your answer. Humans use humor. Vulcans use logic, and there are failures. You will find your own way."

She looked up, composed once again. "For now, have you found our way?"

"I believe this is the proper direction," he said indicating with a nod an open space which would take them over a slight rise.

"Please remember to keep the universal translator activated. Archaic Vulcan is likely to be comprehensible, but we will probably have difficulty with the correct idiom," Saavik observed, taking her position following Spock.

The rise had hidden the fact that there was steep-sided valley beyond and nestled inside was ShiKahr, the white and black stone buildings standing out starkly from the red sand of the valley floor.

"But ShiKahr is not in a valley!" Saavik exclaimed at the sight.

"In our time, no, but who can tell what cataclysms occurred during this period of endemic conflict," Spock observed.

Single file, with Saavik behind, they proceeded down the valley trail to the city. The black stone city walls grew more foreboding as they approached. Only sounds from within gave any sign of life, for the massive gate was shut before them. Spock approached to find a way of drawing attention when he was stopped by a sharp command from above, "Hold!"

Searching above the gate, Spock finally located the alcove in the wall in which the speaker stood with ahn woon loaded and in hand.

"State your business."

"We are weary travelers; we seek entrance," Spock replied mildly.

"No one walks the desert alone these days," the guard said tensely.

"We were on pilgrimage," Saavik called up.

The guard looked her over, but evidently determined he had seen better. Deciding that these two could hardly be a marauding band, he spoke while touching a hidden place in the alcove, "Enter."

A small door appeared in the gate and Spock and Saavik gratefully passed into the confines of ShiKahr. Immediately they encountered a riot of noise and color that was the bazaar. Beggars occupied the space nearest the gate, so they had to climb over outstretched limbs and around pallets and begging bowls. In their immediate area it seemed that all possible variety of weaponry was available for purchase, even two-man kuhn tars, a sort of repeating cross bow. Spock carefully picked a path down one of the main thoroughfares, mentally recording as many details as possible. Saavik had moved close to his right ear.

"This is Vulcan?" she whispered in amazement.

"Indeed."

The next portion of the bazaar seemed to deal with services. Open air barbers plied their trade next to dentists next to masseurs. Curtained booths hinted at more exotic services. The clothing of the inhabitants was colorful and varied; Spock stood out as more soberly dressed. Saavik fingered the gold disk at her neck, which concealed a miniature recorder. The ebb and flow of people was almost more than she could comprehend.

Finally, Spock and Saavik joined a group surrounding a raised platform as the vendor set about to announce his wares.

"Come closer, gentlemen, ladies. My merchandise, as you will see is the finest to be had and will service you very well," the merchant intoned in a sing-song nasal voice.

"First we have a prime specimen with a long future," he said as an assistant led an adolescent girl to the center of the platform. She was dressed in a brief, rough tunic and while she was unbound, she was clearly frightened.

"What am I bid for this house servant?"

"Fifty Kuvats," said a short, soft-looking man on the side of the platform.

"Slavery?" Saavik whispered in astonishment to Spock.

"You are the historian," he whispered back, "but perhaps technically the money goes to a creditor and she is indentured for a limited time."

As if in confirmation, the merchant cried, "Only fifty Kuvats for twenty years of valuable, pleasant service? Let me hear one hundred!"



"One hundred." This bidder was a tall, hard faced man whose dark good looks were marred by thin, drawn lips, a series of old facial scars, and some fresh scratches raked along his left cheek.

"One hundred ten!" another called.

Spock was distracted from the auction by the sensation of an external pressure near his money pouch. Reaching over, he locked his hand around a thin wrist.

"Do not try anything, or I shall surely break it," he hissed in a low voice while drawing the cutpurse up to face him. He was startled to find himself looking at an old woman.

"Please, sir, don't bring me before the magistrate," she pleaded softly.

"Why?"

"I needed the money for her," indicating the terrified girl on the block. "She is my granddaughter; our family could not pay what we owed, thus she is here."

"To whom are you in debt?"

"Stran. He paid burial expenses for Tava's father. When she was not suitably grateful, he decided to call in the debt, especially after she attacked him."

Spock though immediately of the bidder he noted earlier.

"Two hundred," said a now familiar voice.

Sighing softly at his own illogic, Spock raised his voice, "Three hundred."

"Spock!" Saavik gasped in a strangled whisper, "remember why we are here," she urged.

"Three ten," Stran bid on.

"Four hundred," Spock responded.

Some of the spectators whistled through their teeth, and Stran glowered darkly, apparently unprepared for so high a price. The merchant hopped about gleefully in anticipation of a windfall profit; Tava had exchanged her fearful expression for one of curiosity.

"Sold!" the merchant cried after several moment with no further bidding.

"Here," Spock said, handing the old woman the required pieces of metal, "go fetch your granddaughter."

"Thank you, kind sir. I only wish you had not made such an important enemy. Stran is of the royal house of In Pau," the old woman said before slowing making her way to the merchant.

Spock paled visibly.

"It is uncomfortable to have a skeleton in the family closet," Saavik remarked lightly, knowing that Spock's family was from the same house.

"I thought you found the concept of humor difficult," he countered.

"One learns through observation and practice."

"In point of fact, one of my direct ancestors from this period was named Stran, epitheted Scar."

"It is difficult to have bad blood," she observed.

Spock was unable to respond with other than a dark glance, since Tava and her grandmother had returned. The girl threw herself at his feet and grasped his ankles. "My service is yours," she said in a husky voice.

"Rise then," he answered, "it is not my intention to retain your service, but rather to find you a safe situation. For now, can you suggest a place to pass the night?"

"Our house is yours," the grandmother responded joyfully to this turn of events, "as we are favored by your generosity."

Leaving the noise of the bazaar behind, the small group made its way into one of the poorer residential districts.

IV

The house of Tava and her grandmother was built of sand-red block, the same as its neighbors. On entering the high solid gate, they found themselves in a small garden covering one quarter of the grounds; the rest of the space was taken up by the living quarters proper. The garden was primarily planted with vegetables, although arranged as much for decoration as for supplying nourishment. The house was on a simple plan with a man's room, woman's room, and common room with a kitchen.

Names had been exchanged during the walk there, and the time travelers had learned that the grandmother was named T'Ann. During the evening meal various courses of action were discussed, and it was decided that Tava and T'Ann should journey to AhnKahr to beg sustenance from a distant relative. Although this would put them in a position of servitude to the house, at least they would have protection and a secure future. The major drawback in this plan was that the journey required crossing the For-lar Wastes. Bandits were no problem here because the beasts that roamed free made a meal out of anyone who lingered too long. With merely a glance for consensus, Spock and Saavik both volunteered to accompany the pair. With tears of gratitude in her eyes, T'Ann went into the man's room and returned with her dead son's lirpa. As head of the household she formally presented it to Spock, calling on him to be their protector until they reached the house of Saar. On that emotional note the group retired for the evening in order to leave before first light.

Spock lay on his pallet, but found sleep still impossible after thirty minutes of deep meditation. He decided not to get up, however, as it might disturb the others. He wondered at his motivation in rescuing Tava, for the dangers inherent in interference were so great that his action seemed almost foolhardy from every perspective save an emotional one. Fortunately, Saavik was choosing not to disagree with his precipitous decision. It did, after all, afford them the opportunity to see more of Vulcan than anticipated and also see at first hand the diverse customs of antiquity. They were not merely distant observers for whom the motivation of others was opaque, but full participants in this cultural drama. As he meditated further on the facets of their situation, his sensitive hearing detected a muffled footfall. Immediately his full attention strained to extend his senses including telepathic receptivity. Whoever it was was very good at silent motion, for his next awareness of the intruder's presence was a sight shadow blocking the starlight from his view.

Fully alert now and sensing danger, his next impression was a mindflash of an upraised arm, dagger posed in hand. Instantly he reacted. His right hand shot out to block and grip the threatening arm and his left grabbed his assailant's tunic. With a rapid tensing of muscles and change of position he pulled his attacker off balance over his body to land flat on his back on the floor, knocking the breath out of the intruder. He also twisted his right hand at the last moment in the opposite direction producing a satisfactory audible crack. The knife clattered to the floor from the now useless hand, but even so his attacker did not cry out, only grunted softly.

"Spock, is anything amiss?" T'Ann called from the other side of the house.

Rather than take any chances with his would-be assassin, Spock rolled up and over and applied pressure to the right nerves in the groggy man's neck. As he rose a lantern appeared in his doorway surrounded by three pale faces with dark, wide eyes.

"Come," Spock beckoned, "perhaps you can shed some light on our intruder." Saavik responded with a lift of one brow, thinking it was an incredible time for a poor pun.

Tava reached down and retrieved the knife for inspection. "You were not cut?" she asked quickly.

"No, why?" Spock responded.

"See, here, the discoloration on the blade," she said. "It is a nerve poison. The assassin does not need to make a killing blow."

Spock did not show his inward revulsion. Death was a serious business in this society. "But who is he, and why was I his target?"

"He wears the livery of In Pau," T'Ann announced. "Obviously he was sent in revenge."

Tava placed the knife in the weapons box at the foot of Spock's sleep platform. "We should send this shikat back with the knife in him" she glared at the man who was regaining consciousness.

"No, you are right to put it away. Besides, I wish a messenger," Spock said, taking a grip on the man's injured wrist. He did not hurt him, but any more would prove excruciating.

"Listen, man of In Pau," he said softly, "tell Stran that I shall prove a shadow at his door. He will not know the time of my reckoning, but I shall surely come to his house as night follows day. Do you understand the message?"

The man's eyes widened in terror as he nodded mutely.

"Then go, return to your master before I return your knife between your ribs." Spock released his grip, and the man leapt up and sprinted through the door. Spock followed in time to see his assailant dashing through the garden gate.

"It is an hour before first light," T'Ann announced. "Since sleep has fled with the assassin, let us prepare for our journey." She led Tava out, but Saavik held back to speak with her mentor.

"Was the threat necessary?" she asked.

"It is true; I shall come to the house of In Pau," Spock said. "Further, it will probably delay another attempt on my life until after we have departed."

"Reasonable."

"You do not approve of my actions?"

"I agree with all you have done," she confessed, "even the illogical purchase of Tava's service. I only hope I will not disagree with the consequences."

"As do I," Spock said fervently.

V

The little group closed the gate on the house of T'Ann just as the sun crept over the ridged horizon, casting long maroon shadows on the landscape. All were wearing the sand colored desert suits of old Vulcan, which consisted of close fitting, long-sleeved coveralls and ankle-high soft soled boots. The party left by the city gate exactly opposite to the gate of ShiKahr Saavik and Spock had entered. They ranged themselves with T'Ann in the lead as guide, then Tava, Spock, carrying the lirpa, and Saavik trailing, covering his back.

The lirpa, while a lethal close-quarters weapon, was cumbersome to carry. The weighted end rested at Spock's right hip in a snap-open pouch slung from a baldric which he wore cross-body over his left shoulder. The blade of the weapon extended a half meter beyond his left shoulder and the haft was held to the baldric by a thong. It was an awkward way to carry such weight, but did have the advantage of almost immediate accessibility of the weapon, and it permitted walking ease.

As the sun rose to midday the road deteriorated to a mere trail. By late afternoon even the trail had disappeared. T'Ann alerted the group at this point to locate a rocky promontory for night camp. Another hour's journey brought them to a reasonably ideal location—the slightly concave top of a boulder about four meters in diameter and as many high with steep, sloping sides. Such a resting place had the advantage of being all but inaccessible to predators save those who were night flying. Tava mounted first with a boost from Spock, braced and lowered the rope to bring up T'Ann. Saavik followed and finally Spock ascended after the lirpa was

hauled up. T'Ann had already started the supper fire in the small stove from her pack when Spock arrived and tea was brewed quickly. They ate trail rations and sipped the bitter herb tea in silence huddled around the fire. The sun was just setting and Saavik got up and walked to the edge of their refuge to catch the last warm rays—and admire the sunset, although she would not admit it.

"Get down, you fool," T'Ann hissed, "do you want to be carried off by the night hunter?"

Saavik hunkered back by the fire in embarrassment.

"Forgive my charge; she is young and inexperienced," Spock explained, covering for her.

"She will not get old if she is not more careful," T'Ann humphed.

"She learns quickly. When will we arrive at the house of Saar?" he asked, changing the subject.

"We will be two more days on the wastes. The house is located on the border. Not many attackers would care to come this way," T'Ann explained.

With that the night watch was set and the weary travelers tried to find a reasonably contoured space of rock on which to spend the night. As there was no moon, the starlight barely relieved the profound darkness. Cries and animal screams were heard in the distance and only once, briefly, was the starlight blocked by a night flier, but it was either sated or in search of other prey. Even so, Spock had wakened and grasped the haft of the lirpa.

The chill black night passed into the red dawn. The four travelers repacked their gear and ate a hasty, cold breakfast. Getting down from their nighttime perch was easier than getting up. The women let Spock down first by rope with most of the equipment. T'Ann was then lowered. Saavik followed and then the coiled rope. Tava dropped down into Spock's arms. Although none of the party mentioned it, they all noticed the large, clawed tracks that circled the boulder. There seemed to be a sudden chill in the air, for Saavik and Tava both shuddered. The same order of march was established and if the pace was somewhat quicker than the previous day, it was because the marchers were anxious to be done with the journey.

Spock felt a growing unease as the morning progressed. The terrain was increasingly rugged, with many large rock outcroppings and dips and rises in the topography. His sensitive hearing had caught no sound except for the soft footfalls of his companions. He felt an increasing urge to look back on their trail, yet there was never anything to see.

Just past midday T'Ann announced softly, "We are being tracked."

"Yes," Spock answered simply. For the others no comment was possible. The minutes crawled by as they increased the march pace again. Now and then came a sound from behind of a scratch on rock or a dislodged pebble. There was no time to seek refuge.

"Be prepared to act on my command," Spock said in a low voice as he opened the carrying pouch of his weapon and loosed the thong. He knew well what was stalking them. There was only one predator bold enough to hunt Vulcans with a high probability of success: the le-matya, golden, serpent-skinned mountain lion of the deep desert. He sensed its malevolent violet-hued glare piercing his back and remembered previous encounters and the long, curving fangs and the poison of claws and teeth. His knuckles showed white on the dark shaft of the lirpa, the only outward sign of tension he gave.

A rumble began and grew like thunder as the great beast gathered to capture its prey.

"Drop!" Spock screamed over the roar of the springing beast. He swung his lirpa round in a wide arc, gripping it close to the weighted end. The gods of old Vulcan—or luck—were with him as he caught the animal in the side with the leading edge of the blade. The powerful impact translated down his out-stretched arms, wrenching the weapon from his grasp and over-balancing him so that he fell face first to the stony ground. The momentum of the blow carried the blade through the



beast's heart so that its roar was cut to a strangled gurgle and forced the animal off the trajectory of its leap, crashing lifeless to the left of the party. A fountain of blood drained into the sand.

Spock rose slowly to his knees, brushing the dust and gravel from his face, somewhat scratched and bruised. Before him lay the biggest le-matya he had ever seen. It was at least three meters from nose to the tip of the tail and must weigh at least 400 kilos. He repressed an urge to shiver in reaction to their narrow escape. His shoulders and body felt like he had just crashed into a brick wall at full running speed.

"Was anyone touched by the beast's claws?" T'Ann asked, anxious about the lethal poison. When everyone answered in the negative, she went on to the next detail. "Tava, retrieve the lirpa. Saavik, help Spock away from here. Quickly, now," she urged.

Tava had to heave with all her might to withdraw the blade, which she cleansed by shoving it into the sand. Saavik got her arm around Spock and helped him rise and move to where T'Ann was standing. Spock still seemed dazed from the force of the encounter.

"Why the urgency?" Saavik asked.

"You are an innocent," T'Ann replied. "Look ye," she said as Tava joined them.

The sand around the le-matya roiled and writhed as hundreds, then thousands of small sand grubs erupted from the ground and covered the dead animal.

"We had best leave this place," T'Ann suggested, "before they seek fresher meat."

The group began the march again with dispatch. Spock looked back at the beast. It had landed with one of its forelegs in the air. In less than two minutes since the appearance of the sand grubs the leg had been stripped bare. Only bleached bone and sinew now raised itself skyward in protest of lost prey.

Within an hour Spock reclaimed the lirpa from Tava. The group marched on until the first magenta streaks preceding nightfall appeared in the sky. This time there were several suitable night perches available, so they took care to choose one with the easiest access for a biped while discouraging other visitors.

The shock of the attack and dull numbness of the long march had taken its toll of them all and the fire, hot tea and biscuits were most welcome.

"Let us tell stories," T'Ann suggested. "No night camp is complete without stories to teach the young or lift the spirit. We start with the youngest."

"Must I?" Tava asked with a yawn.

"You are part of us," T'Ann insisted, "but it can be a short one."

"Ah, well," Tava said absently musing on her choice. "Once there was a brave warrior who fought well and brought honor to his house and the matriarch. He was not handsome, but he was strong and he had a brave and good heart. The house head despaired of finding him a mate who would accept him, as there were many more comely men in the district. In the house next door lived a young woman who, while very intelligent and capable, was very unattractive. She was not deformed, it was just that her face looked uncoordinated. Her nose was too big and so was her mouth, while her eyes were very small and she suffered from a squint. Both families agreed that the two should never meet, for the offspring would be a disaster. And so he was sent as a page to a far house and she was sent to study music, poetry and government with the greatest mistress of the time.

"On a rare holiday from the wars he sat in the family garden contemplating his loneliness, when he heard a voice from the gods. Disembodied, the feminine voice sang a haunting refrain of longing, accompanied by a harp played with a delicate touch. He soon realized that the source of the song was not heaven, but the next garden. To meet the lady our warrior contrived to climb the garden wall, and that afternoon he learned that she was gentle and witty and courageous, in short all the good things he desired in a mate. As his time was hard upon him, the families

reluctantly agreed to the marriage. She, for her part, appreciated his gentleness and loyalty and courage too. She could expect his full support of their house. In the course of time a child was born to them, a female to continue the house. Rather than the outcome expected she combined the best of both parents and was known for her beauty, intelligence, gentleness and courage.

"Infinite diversity in infinite combinations," Spock interjected.

Tava shot him a surprised glance, "You have just given the moral and this was a story I had just made!"

"Indeed, it was the only logical outcome," he observed.

"Well, then, we have time for one more tale before retiring," said T'Ann.

"Saavik, as next youngest what have you to tell us?"

"I do not know stories for such an occasion," Saavik said matter-of-factly.

"Please," Tava said, "You are so elegant, I would wish to learn from you."

"As you wish. Once, long ago lived flyers, bright and proud who owned the skies. Swift and courageous were the eagle birds who flew in the light of day. Wise and calm were the owl birds who ruled the night. The flyers knew of one another, but never were in the sky at the same time except by accident or in raiding. It was always the eagle birds who would blunder into the night, for the owl birds were too wise and canny to be about by day or to be caught unawares.

"Yet one eagless determined to catch herself a prize—a rare one indeed, for she would mate with none other than the night owl. She plotted and planned and made one futile attempt after another. Traps were set to no avail. She despaired of her life's desire until quite literally her objective fell at her feet. The owl bird had been injured in a storm and was so ill he could not keep his hidden perch. Instead of pride of possession, she felt only sympathy for his plight. She carefully tended him back to health but kept his flight feathers clipped. He would not be forced, but he was drawn to the eagle bird and love drew forth love and in the usual course of things a fledgeling came under their care.

"But tradition had been broken and the other eagle birds demanded the ouster of the stranger; in fact he was to be removed by death. The day was appointed and the eagless ceased clipping his flight feathers in hopes he would escape, but he confessed he would attempt no escape, for life without her would be unendurable. She was now a part of him. And so he was led to the highest perch in the mountain aerie at noon sun and forced off to fly before the executioners. At the last instant she flew between him and certain death unable to bear his murder. She hurtled toward the ground mortally wounded and whether his wings or his desire for life were not strong enough to bear him up is moot. He plunged to the earth beside her.

"The fledgling was abandoned, but was eventually found and cared for by the owls. Neither was she at home in the night world, but always along in the twilight."

Silence settled thickly over the group at the conclusion and the young women removed themselves pensively to their resting places. Spock had first watch and T'Ann sat a long still while, staring at the glowing embers of the cook fire.

"Our children spoke of themselves," she said finally.

Spock nodded in reply.

"You are from far away," she stated.

He nodded again.

She said no more than evening, but sat up until second watch, which she took. Spock slept lightly, his body still aching from his encounter with the le-matya.

Morning dawned hot and still. The very ground seemed to shimmer in the heat and Spock noticed T'Ann glancing worriedly at the sky.

As they were breaking camp Spock found a chance to ask her privately, "Is there some trouble?"

"Yes, a storm," she answered in a whisper. "If we hurry we can reach AhnKahr by nightfall. We will not be able to stay in the open this night; even the predators will take shelter."

T'Ann stepped up the pace and the day wore on. If the quick march was fatiguing to her, she gave no indication. An hour past midday the wind began its fits and starts, showering the travelers with sand and gravel. They stopped for a brief rest and covered their faces with sand masks, leaving only eyeslits exposed to the debris-laden gusts. They had just topped a promontory when T'Ann pointed to a black stone construct across a wide valley. The fact that it was visible at this distance spoke of immense size. The Federation people understood that this was their destination. T'Ann took three more steps and disappeared in a gust of sand from view with a choked cry. Tava screamed and dropped to grab at a retreating hand. Spock and Saavik rushed to the edge of the hidden sand pit and saw T'Ann in the unrelenting grasp of the carnivorous d'mallu plant. It had grabbed her right leg and was even now extending additional tentacles to secure its victim. She made no sound and she was lying face down into the sand, but the tension in her body expressed the considerable pull that was being exerted.

Spock made his decision instantly. No one would be able to pass this plant safely without leaving T'Ann behind. The extent was enormous, at least 100 meters and blocked all passage to the valley. He indicated to Saavik, who had dropped down beside Tava to assist in her hold on T'Ann, that she should attempt to cut away the tentacle. He did not watch as she slipped over the edge with her leg knife. He concentrated instead on his distant target, the center of the d'mallu plant. An accurate 30 meter throw of a lirpa, blade down, would be a champion exhibition feat. He had to do it. There would be no second chance and no survival for T'Ann, nor probably for any of them. He withdrew the weapon from its harness and grasped it just behind the blade. Swinging it in a twisting circle again and again to build momentum, he released it in a high position and watched it sail pirwheeling toward the target. At that moment Saavik cried out that T'Ann was free, but Spock found no cause for joy—his weapon was going to miss. Disappointment choked him and he did not even step aside from another snaking tentacle. Suddenly a gale force gust knocked him aside like a piece of paper, and sand seemed to shower all around him accompanied by a wild keening mental shout that rendered him senseless. His next awareness was of Tava shaking him saying, "You did it, a direct hit!" Spock sat up disbelieving to see most of the plant's tentacles still in the vertical position to which they had snapped in vegetable agony. The ochre sap could be seen oozing out of the center and one by one the extensions lost color and dropped lifeless to the ground.

"But I did not do it, my aim way off," he objected. "The wind must have deflected the trajectory."

"A difference which makes no difference is no difference," Saavik observed with a small smile.

Their relief was short lived as they noticed Tava hovering over a shivering T'Ann. "The d'mallu injected her with its poison," she explained. "She will live only if we can reach help in four hours."

"We will all need help in four hours," Spock observed as he lifted T'Ann into a fireman's carry over her mumbled protests. "We go now," he ordered and set off at a fast job.

The kilometers through the now drifting, swirling sand became a nightmare. Oxygen deprivation caught up with them after eight kilometers, searing their lungs and causing chest muscles to scream in agony. Then numbness set in. Vision narrowed to the next step. Spock dropped under his burden at twenty kilometers—not quite half way to their destination; the two younger women took up T'Ann in a seat carry, allowing Spock to jog another ten kilometers without the extra weight. He relieved them for eight more agonizing kilometers and the two women managed the

remaining distance with Spock on sheer nerve. At last they were at the gates of AhnKahr. Spock could only pound briefly on the gate before he dropped with his companions in an exhausted stupor.

VI

Spock stretched lazily, but resisted the impulse to open his eyes. The luxurious firmness of the sleeping platform with its smooth, soft, bed clothes appealed to his pleasure loving instincts—though he would not admit to them, he could enjoy nonetheless. He almost purred like a tribble as he ran his hand lightly over the platform surface—such a relief from the desert rock tables of the past nights—then his hand came in contact with—his eyes snapped open and instantly he flushed bright green. He was indeed in bed, he noted, but with Saavik on one side and Tava on the other; all were nude. The young women were still sleeping peacefully, and Spock thanked the gods that looked after embarrassed Vulcans that this was not an Earth-style bed with a headboard. He stole carefully out from between the coverings and his companions, and hastily retrieved the sleep robe hung on a peg by the door. Only then did he note his surroundings. The room was sparsely furnished with only the sleeping platform and a low chest. An archway led to what he supposed was a 'fresher. The color scheme was a soft, monochrome beige with the only spots of color in a tapestry of life renewal hung on the fall wall. The desert could be seen through the window on the near wall; the storm had passed and the sky was clear.

There came a tapping at the door, which Spock opened to reveal T'Ann, seeming quite fit and showing no ill effects from the previous day's experience.

"Come to the lounge room," she whispered, noting the sleeping women. "Refreshments have been prepared."

Spock followed her, attacking the fresh fruits and vegetables with gusto as T'Ann filled him in on the past eighteen hours. When they arrived they had been carried in, and she had managed to explain her difficulty before fainting. Treatment had been swift and sure. Saar himself had even sat by her, overseeing her recovery. His face was her first vision on awakening. He had asked the meaning of the journey and what had befallen the group. It seemed he held no love for Stran either, and said that he would consider taking them under his protection. He was about to war against Stran, and this attack on his kinswomen would be an important provocation to action. "In the meantime," T'Ann explained, "Saar apologized for the mistake in relationships, and hoped that you were not inconvenienced. And we are all invited to dine with Saar this evening and to the War Council banquet the following evening."

Spock and Saavik toured the grounds on their own in the afternoon of their recovery. It was Saavik who made the discovery that the giant bell banners over the main gateway had bells of bone, Vulcan skulls. There had to be hundreds of them. She looked decidedly ill, but managed to control her reaction to only paling.

They dressed plainly in the brown and black livery of T'Ann's minor house. Saar supplied the clothing, apparently from house stores. The fit was acceptable and the length of the tunics was perfect, to the floor for the women and to the knee over tights for Spock. They studiously avoided donning exposed weapons, but each wore the expected hidden stiletto. The private dining area was on the floor above and they were led to it by a silent young woman, presumably a page.

Saar rose as his guests entered the hall. He was of medium height, but seemed much taller because of his self assurance and taut carriage. His dark complexion and black, piercing eyes reminded Spock of some of the North and South American natives before the European invasions. That Saar chose to wear his hair long, caught in a band at the base of his neck, only added to that impression. Saar was heavier built than Spock, broader in the shoulder, but his stark black tunic revealed no softness of easy living.

The room itself was as trim as their host, with a low table set for five and reclining cushions being the only furnishings. The walls were sparsely hung with tapestries of the hunt, all in exquisite taste. The general impression was of an amber color scheme, and Spock had a vague uneasy feeling that he was an insect about to be trapped in his surroundings.

"Do join me," Saar said in a deep, resonant voice.

Spock ushered the women to the table and introduced them. "T'Ann is mother of her house, and of the father of Tava. Saavik is in my charge, and I stand as ward guard to her. We were on pilgrimage, and offered to accompany T'Ann to this place."

"That is the 'how' you are here," Saar observed, selecting portions from the serving dishes and holding out his cup to be filled with pungent wine by servants in attendance. "Why?" Saar addressed T'Ann.

"We two are all that are left of my house, and we have incurred the wrath of Stran of the house of In Pau."

Saar's eyes flickered in surprised response, although he already knew part of the story. "How so?"

"We thwarted his desire for Tava as chattel twice. Therefore, we beg sanctuary from you as guard of our over house," T'Ann replied simply. She was not pleading in tone, for all knew that Saar by tradition could not refuse the request. Tava blushed and averted her eyes.

"Is this your desire also, Tava?" Saar inquired.

"Yes, I...uh...wish it," Tava responded hesitantly.

"Spock, what of you and Saavik?" Saar asked.

"We ask only shelter as guest travelers for the night. We can be on our way in the morning."

"Did you not hear of the banquet tomorrow?"

"We could not presume that the invitation could be meant for us also."

"Ah, but it is," Saar responded warmly. "It is settled, then. You and Saavik will be my guests at the banquet and we can formally acknowledge T'Ann and Tava as family. Come, let us enjoy our dinner."

The company ate in a light mood, but Spock was disquieted. Saar seemed especially solicitous of Saavik, though she seemed to notice nothing unusual. Spock could not name his apprehension, but it was there nevertheless. He faced the possibility that it might be something as illogical as jealousy. It is foolishness, Spock chided himself. We will be gone in another day.

VII

Kirk, McCoy and Uhura really had nothing much to do while waiting for the time travelers. Because of the previous mishap, they did not dare investigate other time periods. The swirling mist in the center of the Guardian portal as also unnerving to look at for any length of time, so all had ranged themselves to face away from the Guardian. Uhura had the only active role—the hourly ship contact.

"This place still gives me the creeps," McCoy observed, breaking a silence of some minutes' duration. "How long has it been since they left?"

"Two hours," Kirk replied.

"Do you suppose something could have gone wrong?" McCoy continued.

"Doctor, when you were back in old New York, the real elapsed time was five minutes, but other explorers have reported being gone for up to five hours," Uhura said calmly.

"Well, I don't like it," McCoy humphed.

"Bones, you're just a conservative at heart," said Kirk.

"You're damn right I am, but it does seem to keep me out of trouble."

"Isn't it time for another check-in, Uhura?"

"Yes, Captain," she flipped open her communicator, "...Uhura to Beagle, come in Sulu."

"Sulu here. Time for another check?"

"Of course. Are there any subspace transmissions we should be made aware of?"

"None. You have all the excitement down there."

"If this is excitement, I'll take relaxation. We will check in again on the hour."

"_____"

"Sulu, respond please." Uhura tapped her communicator with a look of puzzlement distorting her features. She closed and flipped open the communicator again when there was no response. "Lieutenant, your end-of-transmission was irregular, please respond," she said in annoyance.

"What is it, Uhura?" Kirk asked.

"I don't know. Maybe my communicator isn't working suddenly."

"Let me try my own," Kirk said drawing his instrument from his belt. "Captain Kirk to the Beagle."

"_____"

"Sir, I have a very funny deja vu feeling. There seems to be nothing out there.

"Lieutenant, keep trying." Kirk could not keep the concern out of his voice.

"What the hell did Spock do now?" McCoy exploded, realizing the implication of the broken contact. "Damn that pointy-eared, green blooded Vulcan, he could have at least warned us to bring rations down here!" he fumed.

"I know, Bones, we're both worried about them too. We'll just have to wait until they get back," Kirk said, stepping between his two comrades and putting his hands on their shoulders.

McCoy had to put the last word in again as he muttered, "If they come back."

VIII

The following day Spock and Saavik spent observing, but staying out of the way of the preparations for the great banquet. Merchants and farmers began arriving at dawn with their wares: cloth for drapes and table coverings, new wines and vintage brews, vegetables and fruits, livestock and fliers. Most of the goods were carried on the backs of the vendors or their servants. There were few carts in the steady parade. As a result, there was much jostling for position, short tempers and several fights. They saw one fruit vendor die in a fracas she started. The body was simply set outside the fortress walls and off the road for whatever scavengers were available. It was a colorful, noisy scene they beheld, and it lasted to midday. At the sound of the hour bell the parade reversed. Those who had not gained entrance to the fortress were out of luck, they just turned around and headed back the way they came. The group was much more subdued and Saavik commented that those who had sold their wares seemed uneasy. More weapons were prominently displayed by this group than on the way in.

The guests began arriving during the midafternoon, riding fanciful fantastic beasts called Kareen, and cloaked in a bright rainbow of colors, both male and female. Jewels and precious metal not only adorned the riders but also decked their mounts. Gaity and high spirits was the tenor of this group, and all rode in stately procession, spaced well enough to put on a good individual show. T'Ann had to come warn the watchers that it was time to dress. Being late for the banquet as a house guest was very bad form.

Spock now had a small private room adjoining the women's quarters, so he could continue in a symbolic way the role of protector. He entered and found banquet garments laid out for him. The ever present black tights would be covered by soft, sensuous red leather boots reaching mid-thigh. His tunic was of a white, silk-like

fabric with full sleeves, open to the waist. A broad red sash completed the costume. The whole effect offended his sensibilities, but there was no helping it. He was also supplied with neckchains set with red translucent gems and a ceremonial dagger. McCoy should only see me now, he thought in disgust as he smoothed his hair and donned the final bauble, a large red stone set in a thumb ring. A light tap on the door informed him that the rest of the party was ready as well.

T'Ann was dressed in a brown and black formal robe with onyx-like jewelry. Tava looked like a Grecian goddess in a pale beige diaphanous toga and gold sandals and tiara. Saavik almost blushed under Spock's arched brow gaze. Her costume was what she had described to McCoy as daring—a single length of scarlet material, caught at her shoulders draped down the front and up the back. A golden girdle gave a harem costume effect. She, too, wore thigh-high red boots. Spock noted that her jewelry included the gold recorder disk.

They followed a silent page to the main banquet arena where a continuous low table ringed off a circular area fifty meters across. Many guests already sprawled among the cushions of the table. At one end a gold canopy indicated the place of honor for the host who had not yet arrived. As Spock assumed, with their lack of political importance they were seated about a quarter way around the table from the canopy. Further away would have indicated disfavor or been insulting, especially to those sitting next to the service ramp. Spock and T'Ann flanked the young women in taking their positions, putting him next to the consort of a minor baron. The positive benefit from entering the banquet hall was that he no longer felt conspicuous, although Saavik managed to turn a few heads in her progress around the room. The rest of the company gave the impression of many-faceted bright jewels on a neck chain, each glittering more brilliantly than the next.

The Seneschal called the assembly to rise as wind horns and seven pages escorted Saar to his place at table. Spock noted that Saar's costume was identical to his except for being all black. When the host took his seat, everyone resumed their conversations and positions; a group of musicians struck up a soft melody in one corner of the room, the servers began bringing in the heavy burdened trays, each announced by the Seneschal, then carried over the ramp to the center of the arena, served to the host, then paraded once around the entire circuit before service to the guests. The wine bearers circulated on the outside perimeter filling cups held out to them.

Spock found his neighbor singularly uninformative, though insistent on his attention, prating on about local gossip and scandal on a sensuous nature. She also had the unfortunate habit of touching him to emphasize her remarks, favoring areas high on his thigh or low on his exposed chest. He found it hard to grit his teeth and be pleasant, but her consort, who surely saw her actions, made no objection. Midway into the third course she suggested they slip away for a bit, but he protested duty to his party, and she finally began to lose interest. He noticed Saavik observing him with amusement.

"I am sorry to spoil your assignation," she whispered.

Spock thought of various epithets Jim would have used, but decided that there was not quite sufficient provocation. Instead he picked up an innocuous vegetable morsel and crunched loudly.

"Spock," Saavik continued sotto voce, "to this point my research has proved futile. I even checked on the provisioning for the banquet this morning. Everything was done from handwritten lists. Yet we know Vulcan had space flight capabilities in 100 years. I do not understand."

Spock arched a brow in response.

"This culture is simply not advanced enough," she continued.

"We have not seen all aspects of this society," Spock reminded her. "Indeed, a great deal of energy seems to go into conflict, but we have seen little of the preparations for or the waging of actual war. Have you noticed the lighting?"

Saavik glanced around sharply. "Indirect! Electric?"

Spock nodded. "That was part of my observations while you were checking the



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manifests. Just because one culture chooses to produce certain artifacts does not...."

The remainder of Spock's lecture was drowned out in the blare of wind horns announcing the entrance of T'Kar, matriarch of the house, borne in her chair to the high place of honor. She was a woman of very advanced years, yet emanated power even from her emaciated frame. Her hair showing under her cap was thin and completely white. When she took her place at table, she moved with slow grace.

"My allies," she intoned in a rich alto with only a hint of a quaver, "welcome to AhnKahr. Your duty serves us. Please resume your seats and your meal. Business will not be discussed until the close of the entertainment."

"I believe we are in the midst of a clan gathering," Saavik whispered. "This is remarkable—more than we could have hoped for."

"We must proceed with extreme caution," Spock warned. "Emotion will run very high."

Saavik nodded over a choice fruitmeat.

The entertainment was lavish and bizarre at the banquet. There were naked tumblers and dancers swathed head to toe in loose red robes, where the main point of the dance appeared to be to produce patterned undulations in the fabric. A blind juggler tossed fire wands, and he was followed by dwarf wrestlers. The center arena was too small for sehlat baiting, but an animal contest between a snakelike carnivore and a flighted lizzard ended in a meal for the snake amidst much wagering.

"Kroykah!" the Seneschal boomed over the yells of the crowd. The silence was instant.

Saar stepped forward. "We are here gathered for an accounting of strength, and it is good."

Shouts of agreement rose from the throats of the lords and ladies-at-arms.

"Now the House of T'Van challenges us for the rights to the southern trade. They are joined by In Pau, Tan Oui and Fal Tor. Are we to allow this predation?" he cried.

"No!" his audience shouted in response.

"Kroykah!" a soft alto also called.

Again instant silence reigned.

"Are we to plan as children?" T'Kar queried. "Fury is useful in battle, but consideration is needed now, and thoughtful strategy if there is to be war!" she cried.

"Eiyah!" returned the shouts of agreement. Spock and Saavik were careful to add to the general voice, so as not to call attention to their lack of enthusiasm for involvement in war.

"To the Plan Master!" T'Kar exclaimed.

A curtain drew back behind the dais of honor revealing a wall of flashing lights. T'Kar walked majestically back to face the panel bathed in flashes of red and white, blue and green. She raised her arms and with stately motion passed her hands over various areas of the panel. It was like some assymetric dance, purposeful yet not balanced and she began to speak in a monotone.

"The powers set against us are formidable. They number twenty lords, two hundred manor mounted warriors and 3,000 common arms....loss of the south would bring down the house....we can prevail with Sotar (a burly man across the table rose in silence), Skeen, Salil,..." One by one as she named warriors who rose and faced the dais, all merriment drained and was replaced by serious purpose. When finished with the litany, she dropped her arms and stood mute before the flashing panel.

"How do you pledge?" Saar cried.

"To death" the chosen responded in a roar. T'Kar looked up and allowed the suggestion of a smile to soften her features as she gazed about with fondness on her supporters.

"Let us finish our folly for this evening," Saar said. "The Plan Master will provide us with strategies in the morning."

The banquet resumed as T'Kar and Saar took their seats and continued in private conversation.

"A war computer!" Saavik breathed in astonishment to Spock.

"Eminently logical," he observed.

"How so?"

"Much of this society's energy is consumed by combat between groups and individuals. The best machines are reserved to the most important functions."

"I hope we can continue our journey before the hostilities begin," she said fervently.

"Agreed. We must leave in the morning."

They were unsure as to the protocol of withdrawing from the banquet, and as the other guests were not leaving they maintained their seats, observing the other revelers surreptitiously. A full hour passed before anything else of note happened.

"Attend all!" the Seneschal cried, pounding the butt end of his staff on the ground three times to draw the focus of the guests. "A final announcement!"

Saar stood as a murmur rippled through the crowd. "Comrades, tomorrow we prepare for war. We have an honored guest with us. Shall we offer him the privilege of combat?"

Shouts of approval rose from around the hall. The tale of Spock's courage in the desert crossing had already made the group circuit.

Spock rose feeling more like a trapped animal than a favored guest. "I appreciate the honor you do me and feel unworthy to participate in the glorious quest," he began. To his dismay his modest words did not seem to dampen the crowd's enthusiasm for his participation in the venture, rather they were getting more boisterous in their urging.

"It would be we who would be honored by your presence," Saar insisted.

What was the game, Spock wondered. Surely he was not the finest specimen of Vulcan manhood, but he could see no alternative but to accept. "It is my honor to serve in this glorious cause," he acceded.

"Bravely put," Saar roared in approval. "We march at three hours past dawn. See the Sargeant-at-Arms at the door for your battle gear. Now let us put an end to festivity until the issue is decided," Saar said, dismissing the banqueters.

Saavik grabbed Spock's arm as he turned to leave. "You can't be serious," she hissed.

"I am in dead earnest—or I shall indeed be dead," he returned, wondering if Saar intended for him to encounter just that fate. "It would be a mortal affront to refuse the invitation. But at least I will have a better opportunity to see the war computer in action first hand."

Saavik was restrained from saying anything further because Tava and T'Ann had rushed over to offer congratulations. T'Ann took Spock's arm and led him away saying, "Just leave the selection of arms to me. I always outfitted my son and his weapons never failed in battle. Above all, you must carry the colors of my house into battle. It would continue a proud tradition."

The night passed quickly for Spock. He tried to glean as much information as he could from T'Ann about the conduct of the coming battle without appearing totally ignorant. He used as excuse the fact that his branch of the house had not been on vendetta in five years, and he needed to refresh himself on the finer points of battle. Since he did not know his fellow combatants well enough to disclose his insufficiency, he must rely on her second-hand knowledge.

Alone, Saavik came to see him off just before dawn. "This is madness, you know," she began.

"Indeed yes," Spock agreed. "But there is an advantage to being afoot. I shall not be in the first charge."

"You will be facing vehicles?" Saavik said, clearly aghast.

"No, only mounted warriors."

"What energy weapons will you carry?" she asked, noting his body armor which

consisted of breast and shoulder plates over a leather jerkin. He wore his high leather boots, greaves and a chain mail skirt. Everything was in relieved black, even the metal accouterments. His Ahn Woon was not attached loosely to his belt and a short sword rested at his left hip. A dagger was harnessed to the inward face of his left arm. Studded heavy leather gloves completed his personal arsenal, apart from the lirpa.

"None," answered Spock, donning his helmet which reminded him of samurai headgear, except it was smooth metal and had the nose guard favored by old Earth European armorers.

"That is completely illogical. How can you face others with energy or projectile weapons in this costume?"

"No such weapons are used," he explained.

"How could a culture which holds war in such high regard and possesses cybernetic capability fail to develop at least crude projectile weapons?" she asked incredulously.

"As I understand it, the code of honor does not permit such weapons in house wars, although they are available for more global conflicts. Further, no powered vehicles are permitted on the field. The only machine available will be a war computer."

"But that's barbaric."

"Precisely. In a savage technological society, the most aggressive form of combat is still left to the individual with the most primitive of weapons."

"Bash and slash fighting," Saavik quipped.

Spock raised an eyebrow in surprise.

"Or so the physical training master at the academy termed our training activities," Saavik explained. "When will you return?"

"The conflict will be decided during the course of this day, since the field of battle is not far distant. If Saar wins, we will return this evening and the opposing forces will withdraw. If Saar loses, we will be dead or taken hostage."

The reality of the danger was finally clarified for Saavik. "Spock, you must be careful," she said earnestly.

"I have every intention of doing so."

She touched her spread fingertips to his. "Then live long and prosper, Spock, son of Sarek."

"I shall bring honor to you and to our house," Spock acknowledged, noting that T'Ann had entered beckoning him to join the combat lords. She helped him into the baldric and adjusted the fastenings on his lirpa. Satisfied that nothing would prevent its quick use, she led the way to the courtyard where the army was assembling.

There were two hundred mounted warriors and ten times as many foot soldiers, about fifty like Spock and the rest were common infantry. The gallant steeds bore little resemblance to the mounts of earthly legends. They were the Kareen, heavy muscled mountain herbivores which looked more than anything like slim rhinoceroses without horns. But they were tireless and fierce, their thick hide required little extra protection. Even so, they were bedecked in padded and studded skirts protecting flanks and chest. The kareen were much too rare and valuable to risk unnecessarily. In Spock's time they were complete extinct. The Pre-Reform wars had decimated their numbers past the point of no return. The mounted combat lords were dressed much as he was, except instead of the lirpa, they carried a thick curved sword for clearing a swath around them.

The metal parts of the armor of Saar's men-at-arms was black. The enemy would bear a golden hue. Apart from that the warriors wore any color clothing they desired and their garb was almost as flamboyant as their banquet attire.

Spock found his place in the second platoon of foot men, and the order to march was given. The army moved away from the desert, for the battle was to take place on a fertile plain near the crossroads for the trade routes. It was, in fact, the

bivouac area for the caravans in their comings and goings. The desert was unsuitable for battle, because the sand grubs equalized all armies as soon as blood was shed.

The morning air was still cool, and the olive greens and russets of the fresh spring foliage were pleasing to the senses. It was hard to comprehend that the tranquility of the countryside was soon to be shattered by mayhem. But the sounds of peace had already been disturbed as the tramp of animals and booted feet rumbled on. The only vehicle in the procession was that which bore the war computer, the master strategist of all Vulcan armies. As the warriors approached the appointed place, all natural sounds ceased and the clarity of the air was obscured by the dust raised by the opposing army. Spock felt tension mounting in his shoulder muscles and across his abdomen, but he decided against meditative techniques to eliminate this tension. It was a real battle he was marching toward, fought with primitive yet brutal weapons. He would need the Vulcan equivalent of adrenaline to hone his reactions for survival. He would avoid taking life, but if he were injured or killed in this time frame, he knew it was for real. And he did not desire to die here.

The order was passed to loose weapons, and Spock unbound his lirpa and unfastened the pouch with his companions. He realized he did not know any of their names, yet they were to guard his life as he was theirs. They were simple cannon fodder—without the cannon, of course—merely massed numbers who were not expected to have esprit, only to follow orders blindly. The mounted lords would make the first charge. The footmen were here to dispatch the unmounted and make sure the opposing army did not break through to attack from the rear. If the ranking mounted lords should do battle, then the issue would be decided quickly for one or the other since the reason for combat would be removed. The leaders did not avoid this confrontation, but it was often difficult to get to one another in the confusion of battle. There had to be an alternative to this senseless bloodshed, Spock mused. The call to battle was sounded and the army surged forward with a wild ullulating cry.

Spock pressed forward with the rest and heard the clang and shout of conflict draw closer as the armies engaged and individuals met their own private contests. The forward motion slowed as the enemy melded with this own army and tried pushing in the opposite direction. How like two dimensional chess, he thought, until he saw the mounted man curved sword on high, bearing down on him. There was space around them and Spock realized how clumsy his own weapon could be against the heavy sabre. The rider gave a shout as he drove by flashing down his weapon—the shout turned to a scream as Spock thrust the blade end of his lirpa straight up at that exact moment severing the rider's hand at the wrist. Spock felt a sickening wrench at his insides as the realization of what had happened came home to him; nevertheless he had presence of mind to pry the clutching fingers of the severed hand from the sabre and add it to his arsenal. His opponent rode quickly back to the enemy camp since his usefulness in battle had ended.

Spock turned to survey the relative safety of his position and saw two of the enemy footmen bearing down on him from the left. "I'll take the green," shouted a youthful companion as Spock hooked the handle of the sabre on his baldric and hefted the lirpa. He used the cudgel end to knock aside the other's blade and the wind and his sense in three well delivered blows. He then looked up in to me to see the enemy swinging for the kill at the young man who came to his aid. With an underarm swing of his own weapon he caught the descending shaft at a weak point and broke off the blade end. Reversing to the cudgel, Spock dispatched the other footman for the duration. It was all for naught Spock saw as he bent over the young man. He paid him the final service of closing his eyes to the last view of the world he would see. Senseless. How long could this stupidity last, he wondered. He knew the two encounters had only taken fifteen minutes objective time.

The clash of weapons and the cries of the soldiers fighting and dying rose in a

terrible roar around Spock as he advanced once again with his comrades. He could see the mounted warriors ahead of him whose rearing and plunging steeds reminded him of the slow torturous progress of horses through deep snow he had once seen long ago—no, once in the distance future—during a winter vacation on his mother's planet. He had been warm and protected in a vehicle at the time. Here he was warm, but the protection of being surrounded by his fellow could swiftly change. The ground he covered was no longer a flat plain but littered with the bodies of dead and injured men. He took care to avoid enemy forms, for some would try to bring down the unwary. Off in the distance Spock could see the vehicle bearing the opposing war computer parked on a steep hill. What if the enemy computer was captured or destroyed, he suddenly wondered, instead of the war lord? Was this acceptable to the battle tradition? He had to find out.

The opportunity arose within 500 meters, or rather could not arise, in the person of Stel, who had sat near his group at the banquet the night before. He was now pinned beneath his fallen mount. Stel was bloodied, but the strength of his struggles precluded serious injury. Spock grabbed the beast's tail and heaved, shifting it just enough to free the rider.

"Are you able to return to our lines?" he asked, helping Stel to his feet.

Testing his legs and finding them sound he answered, "I thank thee, and I am more than able to return to battle if my sitk sword had not snapped beneath this dead weight." He prodded the kareen in disgust with his booted foot.

"Then accept my battle prize," Spock said proffering the captured sword to the rider.

Stel took it, his eyes shining. "My house honors the grace you do me. I owe you my life debt."

"I hope I shall not need to collect this day," Spock rejoined. "I do have a question of honor, however."

"Speak," Stel encouraged.

"What would be the effect of capturing the enemy plan master?" Spock said nodding toward the far hill.

A slow smile spread over Stel's face. "The battle would end in our favor, I should think," he answered.

"It would not bring dishonor?"

"It has not been done, but there is nothing to forbid the attempt. The mechanical masters have been well guarded, but they are only in recent use. What an adventure for the poets to praise!"

"Indeed, a grand enterprise," Spock agreed.

"Come 'round," Stel called, raising his voice to the nearby footmen, "a chance for glory!"

They managed to attract about two dozen soldiers, which would be enough to mount a fast strike but without drawing too much attention before achieving their objective. Thus the raiding party set out in an oblique course to the front line, which would bring them to the base of a particular hill. The fighting along their path was less severe than in other areas, so they made good time. The attrition through encounters with pockets of enemy warrior brought their number down to twenty, but the hill did not appear to be as heavily guarded as Stel had led Spock to believe. Spock, in the lead, turned the group to skirt behind the hill, but before they had gone twenty meters Spock was confronted by a rearing kareen reined by Saar himself.

"Cowards!" he shouted, raising his sword overhead for the deathstroke. There was no quarter. Spock could only hope he was fast enough with the lirpa to deflect the strike and knock the lord from his mount.

"No!" cried Stel dashing forward to engage the flashing sabre with his own sword.

"You betray me too, Stel?" Saar cried in despair. The battle was going badly, and several of his allies had deserted.

"Listen!" Stel begged breathlessly.

Saar leaned over and Stel outlined the plan. His rage quickly cooled to admiration. "Could you use a mounted escort?"

"Your leadership would be most welcome," Spock acknowledged.

The back path up the hill was even more lightly guarded. No one had considered their plan master as a target, and many had been drawn down into glorious battle in the heat of the conflict. When the guards at the top of the hill finally noticed their approach, they madly called for assistance with their horns, but it was far too late. The final skirmish lasted only minutes longer than routing out the pocket resistance they had encountered coming up the hill. The Plan Master was considered so safe from assault that T'Van, the matriarch herself, was among the mounted retinue captured. The final act of the battle was the cease fire call of the buglers acknowledging Saar as victor.

The march back to AhnKahr began shortly after mid-afternoon. The dead and dying had been dispatched, and the wounded and captured were sorted and doctored for the return trip. A few were kept as slaves, but T'Van and her party left in peace. The spoils belonged to the victors, so only the wounded in black armor were not stripped. Spock helped with the first aid contingent, eschewing the plunder and the taking of fresh materials for the bell banners. The spirit of the marchers was buoyant and they sank all the way back to the fortress.

As they approached they saw the battlements hung with pennants, for the populace could hear the army song. The gates were flung wide when visual inspection assured the resident that it was indeed their army returning. Everyone rushed out to greet them and Saar was borne along on the shoulders of joyous allies to mount the massive balcony overlooking the main courtyard.

Saavik was in the greeting crowd too, and anxiously surveyed the faces of the surviving footmen for Spock. When she saw him marching in under his own power, relief swept through her in a terrible shudder. She forced her way to his side as the army and the crowd arrayed themselves before the balcony. A hand on her forearm assured her that he was indeed whole.

The roar of the crowd was deafening but reduced quickly to a whisper when Saar raised his arms and began to speak. "The southern trade is ours!..."

The shouts of the throng roared like cannon.

"...the battle brought honor and spoils to all our allies!"

The roar set off again.

"Special honor goes to the bringer of victory—Spock of recent arrival and new alliance. You will always have a place at my table!"

The cheers sounded now for Spock, because the word of who was responsible for the capture of the Plan Master had spread through the army faster than a rumor.

"Service is my honor," Spock called back.

And the crowd roared in approval.

"We seek also to honor your house," Saar continued. Spock felt a knot of unease constrict his stomach.

"There is yet no heir to this house of lady to aid T'Kar. I propose to assure destiny this day."

The crowd fell absolutely still. Not even a breath was drawn.

"I do the honor to call the Lady Saavik to be my bond mate," Saar announced. Saavik blanched, and Spock stepped forward to address his host.

"I understand the honor you do us, but there is no one to speak for the head of the house. Therefore, we must refuse," Spock said in a quiet voice, but he was heard.

"That will do, Ward Guard," Saar responded, with an edge in his voice.

"As you say, I am Ward Guard to the Lady Saavik and I will defend her honor with the honor of the house in this," Spock said. He gripped Saavik's shoulder to prevent her from speaking in protest.

"Lady Saavik, what is your pleasure?" Saar asked in a silky, dangerous voice.

Saavik was surprised she could speak at all yet her voice held steady. "I am not free to accept your proposal; I bow to the will of my house."

Several well armed guards moved quietly into position behind the two Federation citizens.

"This is not a request you can refuse," Saar shot back. "You may accept the honor or take a position as chattel."

"You overreach yourself," Spock interjected "and offend our honor. I demand the right of challenge!"

"Good!" Saar gloated. "At dawn you will cease to be an impediment."

Spock held his hand out to Saavik and led her past the guards and out of the hushed courtyard to their quarters in silence. Two minutes later T'Ann and Tava rushed in with anxious concern.

"Have you lost your minds? The affront to our host!" T'Ann began ranting.

"...Pales compared to the affront to our honor," Spock replied.

"I would have given anything to be chosen," Tava said wistfully.

"I wish you had been," sighed Saavik.

"What weapons will be used?" Spock asked T'Ann.

"The lirpa."

"I must meditate in preparation," he said finally.

None of the party slept that night, so when the guards came, all four had change and were ready. No one thought Spock had much of a chance including the Commander himself. He was much slimmer than his adversary, and he doubted that his armed combat training was superior. The only problem was that he had to win and he preferred to survive. The joint probability of those events was 0.02.

IX

The sunrise lighting cast long shadows in the hallways, adding to the gloom as Spock's party was led downward into the bowels of the fortress. At last their guides stopped before a massive door. Heaving it open, they motioned the party forward. This area was brightly lit and the floor was desert sand. Spock noted that a circular arena perhaps twenty meters across had been staked out in the center of the hall, which rivaled the banquet room in dimension. Saar and his party faced them across the arena.

"Have you decided on a more prudent course?" Saar called.

Spock shook his head. "Rules?" he returned.

"None save stay within the circle," Saar answered. "The last one standing is the victor."

Spock accepted the lirpa from one of the guards. Before he stepped into the arena T'Ann placed her hand softly on his arm. "It is a true weapon. Honor to you," she whispered. Spock nodded once and stepped into the arena to face his opponent.

"To victory!" Saar called in salute.

"To honor!" Spock responded.

They immediately began circling, taking the measure of each other. Saar took the initiative by rushing Spock, feinting to the right with the blade and reversing, swinging low on the left with the cudgel. Spock blocked the blow and disengaged without a counter attack. The power and speed of Saar's attack was measured and the computed odds dropped again.

Spock tried his own maneuver, swinging the extended blade at his adversary to distract his weapon, then he dropped the lirpa's weighted end to the sand to anchor a two-footed kick to Saar's midsection. It struck home with satisfactory force, but Saar countered with a cudgel swing to the side of Spock's head. Had Spock not scored his own hit the battle would have been over then. As it was, Spock's anchor became a prop as the blood roared in his ears and his field of vision darkened and



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narrowed.

Spock shook his head clear, just in time to raise his lirpa with two hands to block a killing downward strike. The blow missed him, but spent its force where the shaft met the weighted end of his lirpa, shattering the connection. The weapon flew out of his hands and he rolled desperately to the left to avoid the return swing. He almost made it, but he felt a blow on the left side of his rib cage that brought shooting pain. Suddenly his body became disobedient. He saw everything in slow motion, including Saar turning around to gain momentum for the death blow. Spock's right hand hit the broken blade shaft and in final desperation he grasped it and rolled up swinging. He hit something, but wound up on his face in the sand, waiting and unable to stop the end. But it took so long. He felt numb, but he could hear voices shouting. He could not sort out what they were trying to say. Get up? Why should he get up, he wondered. He was so tired, but Saavik was shouting too, so it must be important. He jacked himself to his knees and in detached puzzlement saw Saar writhing on the ground. Oh. Get up, he remembered. He lurched to his feet and swayed there as agony flamed his side and his vision closed like a camera shutter.

He was next aware of Saavik looking down above him at an odd angle—his head must be resting in her lap—while T'Ann was working to stem the green tide pouring out of the gash in his side. He looked back at the battle arena and saw Saar there, still alone. "Why is no one helping him?" he whispered weakly.

"You won," T'Ann said in simple explanation.

"But he lives. He may bleed to death," Spock said with concern.

"So be it."

"Will no one help him?" he asked.

Tava's face hardened in resolution. "I will," she cried as she rushed into the arena. No one hindered her and several of the guards brought her bandages and a basin.

Spock passed out as he was lifted to a litter to be brought back to his quarters for further care.

"Spock! Spock!" The call to consciousness beat on the injured man's brain like the wings of a bird. He roused in response to a world of pain and light. His side throbbed horribly, matching cadence with the pulsing ache in his head. He felt strength enough only to open his eyes, to see the concerned faces of Saavik and T'Ann.

"Be still," Saavik cautioned him. "The wound is deep."

Spock tasted a metallic sweetness in the back of his throat as he tried to frame appropriate questions. A quick internal survey revealed lung damage and hemorrhaging. "You are safe?"

Saavik nodded.

"What of Saar?" he asked.

"You caught him across the back of both legs with the lirpa blade, severing the tendons. He can be healed, but not perfectly. Since there is no other adult male in this house, he remains lord," T'Ann explained.

"And Tava?"

"By her aid she gained gratitude. Saar has asked that she stand with him, and she agreed," the older woman continued.

"Saavik, we must leave here now," he whispered.

"But you are injured!" T'Ann protested.

Spock ignored the other's protests and grasped Saavik's hand. "We must leave now."

"As you say," she agreed sensing the warning tingle of the imminent return through the Guardian. "Bring our travel bags to the bell gate," she called to the attendants as she steadied her guardian into sitting position. He was horribly pale, but a lifetime of discipline proved useful in disguising what he was feeling.



T'Ann opened her mouth to protest, but closed it again in futility. She said simply, "Thank you both for our future." She helped Saavik get Spock to a standing position.

"One does not thank logic," Spock and Saavik said together. "But we were glad to be of service," Spock continued.

He disengaged from T'Ann and concentrated on leaning heavily on Saavik and putting one foot in front of the other. An attendant brought their traveling capes as they made their way slowly down the hall. The progress into the courtyard was mounting agony. Their packs awaited them and Saavik paused long enough to sling both of them over her free shoulder. Spock felt his bandages becoming damp and he could see the confusion in T'Ann's eyes as she stepped to the gate to honor their passing.

"Live long and prosper," Spock said as they stepped through the gate. Saavik led him close to the wall and out of sight behind a slight rise just in time for the Guardian to recall them.

X

McCoy, Kirk and Uhura were standing at the portal waiting for the time travelers.

Before anyone else could speak McCoy lit into Spock with a verbal barrage: "What the hell did you do? The Beagle isn't up there anymore! For all I know, neither is the whole damn universe!"

"Doctor..." Saavik tried to break in.

"You know better than to change history!" he charged.

"I may have indeed done so," replied Spock faintly, shocked at the implication of the Doctor's announcement.

"You pointy-eared bastard, where is the logic in destroying our world for whatever you did?" McCoy ranted.

"Doctor!..." Saavik insisted.

"Bones!" Kirk cried as he grabbed the doctor's arm which he had cocked to swing at the object of his rage.

Spock, however, effectively silenced all the doctor's protests by collapsing into McCoy's arms. As he grabbed the falling Vulcan, he felt the sodden bandages and got a clear look at the swelling bruise on Spock's right temple. "My God," McCoy breathed as he gently lowered the unconscious form to the ground. "Give me some room," he said, stripping off his jacket and wadding it up under Spock's head. "Why didn't you tell me he was hurt?"

"I tried, Doctor," Saavik returned in an aggrieved tone.

McCoy passed his tricorder over the still form and wished mightily for the ill-equipped, closet-sized sick bay on the Beagle.

"He'll be all right, won't he?" Kirk asked.

"I don't know, I honestly don't know," answered McCoy shaking his head.

The doctor worked over Spock's injuries to the limits of his med kit, with Saavik's aid. With his patient rebandaged and covered in his warm cape, McCoy could only sit back and watch, consigning Spock to the Vulcan healing trance. The injuries were bad, but Spock was pretty tough.

Saavik retrieved some survival rations from her desert pack, and distributed them among the rest of the party. Vulcan food might not be pleasing to Human palettes, but it staved off hunger. She then settled in to watch with Dr. McCoy, knowing her intimate knowledge of Vulcan physiology might prove helpful in monitoring Spock's condition. Another part of her mind occupied itself with writing her paper—if indeed there would ever be any need for it.

Kirk had tried to keep out of the way when McCoy was so frantically working over his patient. Now there was nothing he could add to the watch, nor to any

answer to his question, so he rose and wandered over to where Uhura was sitting pensively.

She looked up at his approach, and held up a half eaten biscuit. "This has got to be one of the first Vulcan disciplines," she observed. "For mild mannered people, they surely like spicy hot foot." She was relieved to see her comment bring the first brief smile to Kirk's lips in several very tense hours.

He took a seat on the ground beside her, resting his back against a giant fragment of stone monolith and stared up into the dark, star filled sky. It was strange how much like being in space it was when there was no city glow to interfere. Only the barest twinkle told him he was planetside.

"Captain," Uhura broke in, "how is Spock?"

"Alive, but other than that I don't know."

"Will we get out of here?"

"I don't know."

"When I was so much younger, on the bridge I used to think that you had all the answers—that you had to have all the answers," mused Uhura.

"I must have been a good actor."

"The best. Do you have any plan, Captain?"

"Call me Jim. Right now there is no Starfleet to give us rank. I thought that when Saavik can be relieved of her vigil, she could review Vulcan history to see what needs to be put right."

"And if it can't be fixed?"

"Well, then we will have to find, each of us, some time and place where we can live out our lives."

"It doesn't make much sense, but I hope we can stay together."

"So do I, Uhura."

"...Penda..."

Kirk smiled at this competent woman who seemingly could take disaster in stride. The Federation was a good system, if it could produce such people.

"Spock will have a special problem because of his mixed ancestry; he could never be able to blend in on Vulcan," he observed.

"And you would miss him," Uhura smiled gently.

"He is my friend," Kirk said simply.

Saavik and McCoy were observing that friend carefully. He is rousing, Doctor," said Saavik.

"Don't you need to hit him or something?" McCoy asked, when Saavik made no move.

"Why should I do that?"

"Blast it, the last time Spock was in a trance he required pain to revive him," McCoy exploded.

In her best pedantic tones Saavik lectured, "The pain of his head injury should be sufficient to bring him to consciousness."

"But wouldn't he be healing that too?"

"The trance is not effective on injuries to bone and brain tissue unaided. Any additional trauma could severely damage Commander Spock."

"Oh," was all McCoy could think of in response. Fortunately, the object of their concern chose this moment to open his eyes.

"Why are we not on the ship?" he asked in confusion. "Oh, I remember—history changed—." Spock made a move to get up and swiftly changed his mind as the ground and his stomach started spinning in opposite directions.

"That's better," McCoy said as he straightened the coverings over the Vulcan.

"If you follow my orders and rest, then perhaps we can try the getting up routine in several hours, with assistance. A concussion is nothing to mess with, believe your old family doctor."

Spock almost scowled, but made no quick comeback since logic was on the doctor's side. Rather, he addressed Saavik, "Have you reviewed the tapes of our activities?"

"No," she admitted.

"Have you observed Vulcan history through the Guardian to ascertain where history has been changed?"

With downcast eyes she shook her head.

He merely raised an eyebrow in silent query.

"I was concerned that my assistance might be required during your self-healing; other activities were not of immediate importance," she admitted.

"I appreciate your concern," Spock said gently.

McCoy had to cover his mouth and cough to hide his reaction over Saavik's slow green flush, while the clinician in him observed that it had more of a bronze tone than Spock's.

"I suggest there is work to be done, if we hope to return to the Beagle, Spock said.

"Indeed," Saavik agreed. "But I have been mentally reviewing Vulcan history. Was not Surak's sire crippled and therefore less bellicose than was standard for the time?"

Spock paused for a search of his own memory. "Yes, the legend holds that to be the case, and Surak's mother was named Tava."

"Coincidence?" she asked.

"Unlikely. Check the Guardian first."

Saavik rose and faced the Guardian with her recorder. "Guardian, present the story of Vulcan past."

"All is as you see it," softly thundered the voice. The colored mists swirled and coalesced into a rapidly changing panorama and then dissolved again. Saavik then went over to Uhura to compare records while Kirk approached doctor and patient.

"How are you feeling?" Kirk asked.

"Uncomfortable, but then I usually am under the doctor's ministrations," Spock said wryly.

"Uncomfortable! Just you wait!" roared the doctor in mock combat. Kirk could not suppress a smile.

"Obviously you are on the mend. Just what did happen?"

"I am not sure anything really did change," Spock said uncertainly. "I merely purchased a young female slave and turned her over to her kinsman and then crippled him in personal combat."

McCoy and Kirk looked at each other in astonishment. "A female slave?!" McCoy latched on to a chink in the Vulcan armor. "And I suppose you're going to tell me you did not wind up naked in bed with her."

"In fact I did," Spock said, mischievously playing into the doctor's hands.

McCoy only dropped open his mouth in shock and even Kirk gaped at his friend.

"It was a mistake arranged by our host when we collapsed in exhaustion at his fortress."

"Oh."

"Why, Doctor, at a loss for words? Spock asked.

"You never cease to amaze me, Spock. I'll even admit that this round is yours."

"Now you amaze me, Doctor."

Uhura and Saavik walked quickly to rejoin their companions.

"Captain, there is a problem," Saavik began, drawing their attention.

"We have reviewed the tapes twice," Uhura continued, "and they do not diverge at all until well after Spock and Saavik's expedition."

"The point of divergence is the initial contact between Vulcan and the Federation. There is no contact at all recorded on my tape..."

"...and the contact is clearly elaborated on my earlier recording," Uhura emphasized.

The men were stunned. "But if the event change did not happen on Vulcan, how could any of us change time in another location," Kirk said incredulously.

"By the fact of our absence," Spock observed.

"Now there's a Tom fool notion. How could we affect time by not being where we never intended to be in the first place," argued McCoy. "It's illogical," he said triumphantly.

"Apparently to maintain the continuity of this time frame we must enter another time frame and do or not do some action to repair the disturbance. It may not seem logical to our frame of reference, but rather be necessitated by some larger order," Spock returned patiently.

"That sounds mystic," McCoy accused.

"It is the best analysis I have to offer under the circumstances."

"I don't think this discussion is going to solve the problem," Kirk broke in.

"Perhaps we had better find the rift in time and repair it."

"But, Captain," Uhura objected, "there are a lot of worlds out there, and many we don't know the history of at all."

"We should begin with the Federation worlds before Vulcan contact," Saavik said in planning. "Of course, the problem could be accelerated growth of some known or unknown aggressor precipitating the demise of the Federation before contact or..."

"You're just as cheerful as Spock," McCoy observed.

"Let's go with the simplest possibilities first and check the pre-Vulcan contact Federation worlds," Kirk said. "There were only a dozen or so."

"Twelve full members and three associates," Saavik corrected.

"Is that all? Then what are we waiting for?" McCoy urged.

XI

Predictably, Saavik has reviewed the history of the Tellurite Hegemony and the Andorian Populum before Uhura had completed her survey of Earth history, possibly because she had double checked and back checked and back checked events—for she had found an anomaly.

"Captain," she said in a puzzled tone, "Do you remember that planet where ancient Rome survived—Planet 892-IV, I believe."

"Yes, Uhura," Kirk said, "you have found something?"

"I think the Guardian has presented Earth history as I requested, but look at this," she said handing him the tricorder.

McCoy rose and peered over Kirk's shoulder as he did a quick scan of the tape in question. Chariots, architecture, gladiators, combustion engine vehicles and aircraft of Imperial Rome paraded across the screen until the first alien contact occurred and the inevitable war and then nothing.

"Surely there is a mistake," Kirk said.

"That is what I thought, but I ran the tape twice. There is no variance," Uhura insisted.

Saavik had joined them. "Where does the history appear to diverge?" she queried, asking the logical question.

"Very early, from what I can tell," Uhura said. "I was especially struck by the fact that the Egyptian Empire never seems to have ever existed."

"But they were not central to Western Civilization as it was called on Earth," McCoy objected.

"Why, Doctor, I did not realize you were also an historian," Spock said, not wishing to be left out of developments.

"I do occasionally pay attention to events outside of medicine," McCoy shot back.

And out of date information, as usual," Spock said mock seriously,

"Saavik, how far back in time in Earth years did you travel to Vulcan?" Kirk asked.

"Approximately 6,437 years."

"What period would that correspond to in Earth history?" he asked generally.

"The uniting of Upper and Lower Egypt and the start of the dynasties," Uhura said quickly.

"Then that should be where the historic anomaly begins," Kirk concluded. "We will have to travel to that period and place and do or undo what is needed."

"But there is a serious problem," Uhura observed. "The period in question is prehistoric. We can't know what is needed."

"We'll just have to trust to luck," Kirk reasoned. "Anyway, it's as good a place and time to live in permanently as any other, I suppose."

"I suggest that Spock and Saavik remain here, though," McCoy said.

"Why, Doctor?" Spock asked.

"Well, you would be pretty conspicuous in that time and place. You might have a better chance on a Vulcanir planet. Also, physically you are not up to par with the concussion."

"I object, Doctor," said Spock. "In the first place I am a hybrid, as you are so fond of pointing out, so that I would not fit in a Vulcanir society which has had no contact with Earth. Secondly, since Saavik and I caused the displacement by our presence in the past, logically we were the precipitators of the change, whether by our presence or absence I do not know."

"Logical," Saavik affirmed.

"Are you up to traveling?" Kirk asked seriously.

"As long as I do not have to undergo strenuous exertion, I should be capable of the undertaking," Spock assured the others.

"Doctor?" Kirk asked for confirmation.

"I don't like it, but I guess it would be okay," McCoy conceded.

Uhura took charge of costuming for the foray into Earth's past. Pirating Spock's and Saavik's Vulcan gear, she found enough material for simple tunics for herself and Saavik, leather kilts for Kirk and McCoy, and a pleated linen kilt for Spock, as well as head coverings for the two pair of offending ears. Everyone joined in the sewing and McCoy used his med kit laser to put holes in leather pieces to fashion sandals for the party. The Vulcan carry bag was stripped of its metal findings and crudely restitched to pass in the time period. All metallic items except for the med kit and Saavik's medallion recorder had to be left behind. It was decided to spend some time getting acclimated before making contact with the natives, at least enough time to develop a protective tan. When Uhura had explained to McCoy that he and Kirk were wearing the barbarian costume to match their coloring and physical characteristics and that Spock would wear princely garb because he was closer to Egyptian norm, McCoy was predictably miffed.

"Come on, your highness, time to practice being on your feet," McCoy said, dourly motioning for Kirk to give him a hand.

"I do not understand why you are so upset, Doctor," Spock responded, pulling up to a sitting position and quickly resting his head on his knees. "This is not the first time Vulcan superiority has been demonstrated."

"Humph!" Together Kirk and McCoy helped Spock stand. The doctor was concerned because the Vulcan was very unsteady, and did not release his hold on his supports.

"Okay, Spock, how many?" McCoy asked holding up two fingers.

"Three." McCoy and Kirk shot each other alarmed glances.

"As you have surmised, Doctor, I am suffering from double vision," Spock said, swaying between his two friends, having noted the stunned silence.

"Maybe you should stay here and rest while the rest of us go on, or maybe McCoy can stay, or..."

"Captain, you would then be reducing the probability of success by fifty percent," Spock observed, not mentioning that the probability was already vanishingly small.

"I don't like it, Spock," McCoy broke in. "You're in no shape to go anywhere,

and the heat and the possibility of sun stroke are too risky."

"Doctor, the risk is mine, and far smaller than the risk for time as we know it and for our comrades. It would be a worthwhile exchange, don't you think?"

"Spock, I can't let you take that chance," Kirk said.

"Leonard, Jim, please, I would much prefer to try to right things in your company or to die trying, than to be left behind."

"Okay, Spock," Kirk said over McCoy's frown, "we all go together but we'll wait a bit until you can at least walk unaided." They eased the Vulcan down into as comfortable a position as possible. McCoy ran his scanner over his patient, shook his head and selected a hypospray from his kit. Spock did not object when McCoy administered his medication and he drifted off into a doze within minutes. Kirk followed McCoy when he rose to walk among the ruins.

At a distance from the others, McCoy stopped abruptly. "Jim, it is murder to take Spock with us! He is one very sick man. It is not a concussion, but a fracture, and I fear there is intracranial bleeding."

"What would you have me do, Doctor? Leave him here alone to die? Saavik has to go with us; Uhura knows the most about the period's history, and if she stayed behind she wouldn't be able to give much more than first aid. Those of us who did go would be very likely to require your services under the primitive and savage conditions we'll find. And I would be as bad as Uhura in caring for Spock."

"I'm afraid I'll have to lodge a formal protest on medical grounds," McCoy argued.

"Bones, you know Spock would crawl after us if we left him behind," Kirk countered.

"I hate to admit that you're probably right. Hell, I seem to be losing all of my arguments lately."

Neither man had noticed Saavik approach so they were startled when she spoke up. "Gentlemen, let me ease your dilemma. We cannot know which of us must do what is necessary in this past time. Therefore, we all must go, and do what seems right, until we live out our lives or repair history."

"It's settled then," Kirk concluded, "we'll stay here another day and then all make the trip."

XII

Names were chosen for Spock and Saavik, to fit closer to Egyptian norm. Spock became Sopek and Saavik elected Sabi-ka. It was decided that the barbarian guise for Uhura, McCoy and Kirk permitted them to retain their own names. The costumes were donned and Uhura carefully arranged and tied the headclothes to hide the Vulcanoid differences from view. With travel capes converted to tent cloth and all gear packed and hefted by Kirk and McCoy, the party seemed ready to begin. Spock managed to get up unaided, although very slowly, and walked forward with the others into the unknown past.

The heat hit everyone like a sledgehammer, although the open savannah they stepped in upon was a lot moister than they could have preconceived. Herds of grazing antelope could be seen in the distance. The bright, cloudless blue sky was what they expected, but not the grass.

"This is Egypt?" McCoy exclaimed. "Where are the deserts?"

"Uhura smiled. "Doctor, this land gave rise to a great civilization. If it had started out a desert, people would not have settled here."

"Logical," Spock quipped.

"Oh," McCoy said in a small voice, and then proceeded to mumble something about losing every round to everyone.

"Do not take it so badly, Doctor. After all, there is the benefit that this climate is most comfortable for my physiology—much better, in fact, than the chill

of the Guardian planet," Spock observed.

"Some comfort when I feel like I am being broiled and boiled simultaneously," McCoy complained, brushing the sweat off his forehead with a bare arm.

The next week was spent in becoming acclimated. The light skinned humans had to limit their exposure to the equatorial sun until they had developed a sufficient tan to protect themselves. Even so, Kirk found he was most sun sensitive, and managed to get two sunburns in the course of the week. The worst part, he had complained, was peeling like a snake afterwards—the itching drove him crazy. Spock and Saavik took to the climate naturally and were bronzed beautifully within two days. Fortunately, McCoy had several chemicals in his med kit which cut the heavy green cast down to the almost unnoticeable point. Uhura and Saavik, as the least sun sensitive and most adept, hunted and foraged. Spock kept watch and did most of the day cooking, while McCoy and Kirk huddled under the tent swatting at blood-thirsty flies. Spock improved in appearance and coordination with each passing day of rest, although he was still plagued with spells of double vision. The men used the time to make some appropriate tools for current technology: bows, flint knives and maces which they made by drilling holes in the center of a rounded or ovoid stone. As McCoy expressed so philosophically, they had nothing better to do with their time.

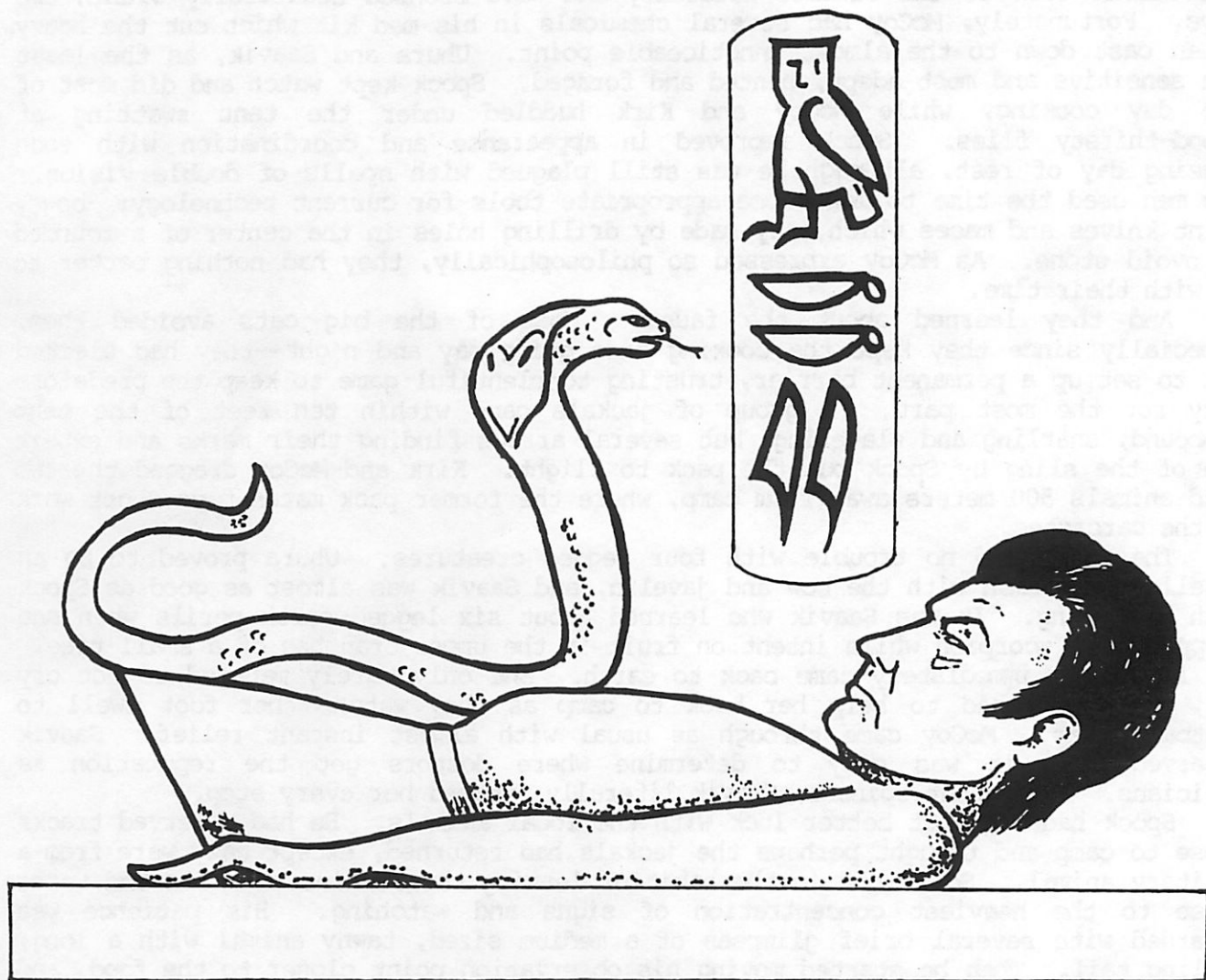
And they learned about the fauna. Most of the big cats avoided them, especially since they kept the cooking fire going day and night—they had elected not to set up a permanent barrier, trusting to plentiful game to keep the predators busy for the most part. A group of jackals came within ten feet of the tent compound, snarling and slaving, but several arrows finding their marks and expert use of the sling by Spock put the pack to flight. Kirk and McCoy dragged the two dead animals 500 meters away from camp, where the former pack mates made short work of the carcasses.

The woman had no trouble with four legged creatures. Uhura proved to be an excellent marksman with the bow and javelin, and Saavik was almost as good as Spock with the sling. It was Saavik who learned about six legged earth perils when she stepped on a scorpion while intent on fruit in the upper branches of a small tree. Her attention immediately came back to earth. She only barely managed to not cry out, but Uhura had to help her back to camp as they watched her foot swell to football size. McCoy came through as usual with almost instant relief. Saavik observed that it was easy to determine where doctors got the reputation as magicians. After that episode, Saavik literally watched her every step.

Spock had somewhat better luck with the local animals. He had observed tracks close to camp and thought perhaps the jackals had returned, except they were from a solitary animal. So he got in the habit of leaving the remains of meals and water close to the heaviest concentration of signs and watching. His patience was rewarded with several brief glimpses of a medium sized, tawny animal with a long, curling tail. Then he started moving his observation point closer to the food, and the food closer to the camp. The only reason he was doing this, he told himself, was to relieve the camp tedium of enforced inactivity.

It took only two days for Spock to get within two meters of the animal, which he discerned to be a member of the canine family. On the third day, he offered hand held food which, after much anxious whining and pacing, was snatched by the wary animal. Thereafter, the dog would patiently sit at the outskirts of camp at food times, and wait for its portion. No one other than Spock could approach it—her, as Uhura observed. Spock decided to name her Set, after a boyhood friend. The rest could not determine if this was a compliment or not, but McCoy noted that Spock had once again won a lady's heart. Spock deigned to respond with raising only one brow.

On the last night of their training camp, McCoy had his own experience with local fauna. They had all settled in for the night when McCoy felt a movement along his right thigh up to his abdomen. Then it stopped. It was not furry. It was



smooth and felt cold to the skin of his stomach. McCoy froze. Kirk was outside on guard duty so he gave a strangled whisper, "Spock!"

The sound of movement from the other side of the tent told him his companion was awake.

"We have company," McCoy breathed.

"Indeed," came the reply.

"Is it what I think it is?"

McCoy usually started the night without covering, so the long narrow form was clearly visible to Spock's acute night vision. Fortunately, visual disturbances were not troubling him this evening.

"It is an animal seeking warmth for the night," Spock observed.

"Why me?" McCoy raged in a whisper.

"Obviously your fiery temper attracted it."

"Not funny."

The conversation seemed to disturb the somnolent reptile and it lifted its head to locate the source of its pique and spread its upper ribcage. McCoy had a perfect view now in the dim interior of the tent, and stared in horrified fascination at the unblinking reptilian gaze under the threatening hood.

"Don't move, Doctor," Spock warned as he edged toward the man and animal. His answer was silence; there was no indication even of McCoy's respiration.

With striking speed, Spock threw his blanket over the upraised head of the snake and then pulled it down between McCoy's body and the rest of the snake's body, pinning it under the material. Before it could react he gathered up the covering and flipped the snake's tail into the blanket bag. He left the tent with his burden while McCoy lay there grasping for breath.

After several minutes Spock returned without the blanket. "Are you well, Doctor?" he asked.

"That's a better remark than don't move," McCoy grumbled. "Of course I am and—thanks."

"You're welcome, I believe, is the correct response."

McCoy could not see Spock, but he knew the tone—one brow up and the corners of his mouth twitching.

"Uh, where's your blanket, Spock?"

"I can fetch it in the morning."

"Huh?"

"It was illogical to let the snake loose close to camp or to venture too far out from camp. Further it was unreasonable to handle the snake uncovered to I tossed both reptile and blanket out into the night."

"Come again?" McCoy chuckled.

"It was illogical..."

"Never mind. But unless you want to freeze to death or share covers with Saavik or Uhura I suggest we share my blanket."

"Unnecessary," came the controlled reply.

"Suit yourself."

After five minutes of rustling at the other side of the tent McCoy felt Spock settle down beside him and draw the covers over his chilled form.

"At least you're warmer than the snake," McCoy cracked.

"One would expect more gratitude for saving a life," Spock mumbled.

"I thought Vulcans found gratitude illogical."

"It is, unless the individual has a blanket. Good night, Doctor," Spock said rolling on to his stomach.

"Good night, Spock," McCoy said with a smile. I finally won a round, was his last thought as he drifted off to sleep.

The time had come to make contact with the native population. The tents were struck on the seventh day and carry packs tied for Kirk, McCoy and Uhura. Spock was left unburdened because of his injury, and Saavik because of the image they were trying to project of noble travelers and retinue. Although there were unsure as to which bank of the Nile they were on, nor whether they were in Upper or Lower Egypt, they could see a line of intense green in the far distance, indicating an extensive forest of some sort. The line of march put Kirk and Uhura in front, then Spock and Saavik, followed by McCoy. Tagging along at the tail end was Set. They had decided to just keep walking toward the forest until they ran into someone.

The walk over the hard-baked stony ground was tiring, and the heat of the day caused the temperature of the ground to rise to a distinctly uncomfortable temperature. The stretches of sand they crossed afforded relief from walking on pebbles, but the slipping sand made the effort harder, and there was the added problem of the burning sand pouring over the tops of their sandals. They took rest breaks whenever the scrub afforded some protection from the blazing sun. The Vulcans found the conditions tolerable, but preferred the greater protection of their desert suits. Kirk and Uhura endured in silence, but by midafternoon McCoy's usual grumbling had become a stream of complaints. They were being regaled for the nth time about Spock's stupidity in changing time when Kirk froze mid-stride, matched by the other except McCoy, still intent on his personal misfortunes, who walked right into Spock.

"What..." the Doctor sputtered.

"I believe the people we have been seeking have found us," Spock observed quietly. Without warning a dozen archers seemed to have risen like a mist from the land, all with bows drawn and trained on the Beagle explorers. "Say nothing, make no move," Spock advised as he slowly walked forward, palms up, toward the only hunter who was adorned with other than a quiver slung across his chest and a leather kilt. The man who Spock hoped he had identified correctly as the leader, because of the blue leather helmet he wore, also chose to advance toward Spock, setting his meter-long bow at rest.

"We come in peace," Spock said, knowing the universal translator, without examples of the native tongue, could do little more than convey his tone.

The man stopped two meters from Spock and regarded him cautiously. He stood about a meter and a half in height, but was solidly built. Most of his companions were slimmer or at least less well-muscled, but all appear to be perfectly competent fighters. Skin tones varied from bronze to a chestnut color, with the leader tending toward the darker shade. "You show the Re-sign of peace," the man finally observed in a deep basso voice, "but I do not understand the words."

"We come from a far place, the accent is different," Spock said. "We come as friends," he reassured him.

"Ah," the man acknowledged, hearing his own tongue as he expected. "Since you have ruined our hunt, you may as well come with us to our encampment and trade a story or two."

"You trust us? But you do not know our names," Spock objected, astonished.

"I trust who I can see. If you are in our camp, you cannot come at night in stealth and do us harm."

"Logical," Spock complimented him.

The man broke into a grin and the Beagle group found they could breathe again. "I am called Narmer, stranger, and I believe I can trust you."

"If you have my name, I am no stranger. My name is Sopek. The remainder of the party are my sister-wife Sabi-ka, and servants, Uhura, Kirk and McCoy, who is our healer," Spock said in introduction. Saavik's eyes flickered at Spock's choice of her designation. The other simply nodded at the mention of their names.

"Come with us, friend Sopek," Narmer invited. As he called his men together he told their names to Spock and the others. They then set off at a slow jog toward the tree line. Sensing an absence, Spock glanced around, but Set was nowhere to be seen.

The encampment proved to be about ten kilometers from their starting point, just on the verge between dry savannah and the lush forest. The five tents were arranged under two trees, but the real woods were still several kilometers distant. A stream was within walking distance. Although the tents were sturdy, flat roofed affairs, it was clear that this was a temporary hunting party. Only two cook women were present, and one other man as guard. There were no children and no domestic flocks of anything, nor were there any storage facilities, although meat could be seen drying on racks. It was near dusk when the merged parties arrived, and the savory smells from the cook fire were urgently reminding everyone that they had not eaten since morning.

Narmer pointed the way to an arc of rush mats placed near the fire. The Federation people eagerly followed their host and his hunters to the eating area. Kirk sank gratefully down on a fur mat to dislodge a pebble from his sandal and all sound ceased from the Egyptians. Spock knew etiquette had been breached when Narmer turned to him, and he read cold fury in the darkening visage.

"Is this the behavior you allow of slaves?" Narmer spat.

"I beg you forgive his gross manners," Spock apologized. "It is my fault—I allowed great latitude on the trail." Kirk by this time realized his error and had slipped off the mat. For want of a better idea he remembered Uhura's instruction on proper obeisance to a noble and assumed the position on his knees with his face in the dirt and his arms stretched forward, palms up. He ground his teeth silently at the indignity of his position, but mostly at his own stupidity. He would have flunked Cultural Contact I for much less. He controlled most of his reaction, but not the deep blush that started at the roots of his hair and heated his back.

"He will be punished," Narmer stated fact.

"It is my fault..." Spock protested.

"You will take the punishment?" the Egyptian leader asked incredulously.

Spock was about to say yes when he suddenly realized that punishment was likely to involve some kind of buising or bloodletting. The color drained from his face. He could not take the risk of disclosing his difference.

Kirk came to that conclusion simultaneously and rose up on his knees. "I will kill any man who touches my Lord Sopek," he said with determination.

"His loyalty is above reproach, although he is only a slave. He serves me well as he is; I do not wish him permanently injured," Spock responded. "What satisfaction do you demand?"

"I would have his forefinger cut off, but since you are our guests and your customs are different, ten lashes would be appeasement enough," Narmer answered.

Spock sickened at the thought of the injury to his friend, but there was nothing he could do about it. "Do you wish to wield the flail?" he asked with a voice suddenly gone dry.

"He is your servant."

"It is your affront."

"Very well," Narmer agreed, motioning two of his men to take Kirk's arms. A third went for the whip.

"You can't let them do his to Jim," McCoy growled under his breath.

"Nor can I take the punishment myself, Doctor," Spock said, tonelessly trying to cool down McCoy and get him thinking. Spock felt the Doctor next to him gathering for a fight. He quickly reached out and found the vulnerable part of McCoy's neck, applying just enough pressure to immobilize without unconsciousness.

"I am sorry, Doctor; there is too much at stake. We cannot interfere." McCoy was a study in frustrated rage, but he did hold his tongue. McCoy thought his profession had made him immune to tears, but in his helplessness he found his eyes brimming.

Two men held Kirk's arms where he knelt. The whip placed in Narmer's hand was actually three knotted leather thongs attached to a wooden handle. The captain steeled himself for the blows to follow. He would try to be stoic after Spock's example, but damn, he would regret his carelessness for many nights to come.

Narmer raised his arm and flashed it down across the pinned man's back. The one called Kirk shook under the blow, but did not cry out. Again.

McCoy clenched his teeth and closed his eyes against the sight of the beating Jim was taking, but he felt Spock flinch every time the flail came down. Welts were raised on Kirk's back, then they were smashed open. Blood welled up.

At the tenth stroke Spock cried, "Enough!" He had kept his hand on McCoy's shoulder and the doctor was afraid if things went much further, Spock would have crushed it. As it was, he could already feel a swelling bruise. The wonder was that neither Kirk nor Uhura nor Saavik had cried out. He turned, since he was now able, and saw quiet tears coursing down Uhura's face.

Spock stepped forward as the captain was released, and barely prevented him from falling on his face. Lifting him to his feet he supported most of Kirk's weight in a one-armed embrace. "Where may I take him for recovery from his lesson?"

Narmer nodded toward one of the tents. "A good man. I would be proud to command such loyalty and grateful to have such a one at my back," he acknowledged.

"As I am," Spock said. "I shall return to your hospitality in a small while," he added excusing himself and half-carried/walked Kirk to the indicated tent.

McCoy and Saavik followed them into the tent, while Uhura accepted a basin of water, some cloths and ointments from the serving women before joining them. Kirk was stretched out on his stomach and concentrating very hard on suppressing the whimpers that crowded the back of his throat. Damn, it hurt more than he expected. Even McCoy's usually gentle touch seemed like prodding with a hot poker.

"Jim, your squirming is not going to make the clean-up easier," McCoy chided as he sponged the warm water over Kirk's injured back.

"You have used a lighter touch," Kirk said tightly.

Spock knelt quietly beside his friends, allowing Kirk to grasp his hand for strength. "Captain, I apologize for this affront," he said finally.

"It wasn't your fault, Spock," Kirk said, still wincing under McCoy's ministrations. "You could not have prevented my stupid blunder, nor even foreseen it."

"But if I had not inadvertently changed history, none of this would have happened," he said, voicing the nagging guilt.

"So you hold yourself accountable for the loom of time," McCoy said sarcastically as he applied the innocuous local ointment to Kirk's back.

"Doctor?" Spock queried with a raise of his brow. "I do not understand your reference."

"An ancient poem. I am surprised I finally know something you don't. Anyway, the point of the piece is that an individual cannot completely know or control his destiny."

Spock digested the thought for a moment. He did not indicate his conclusion. "I apologize to you also, Doctor."

"For what?" McCoy asked, securing the bandages over Kirk's welts.

"For incapacitating you."

"Look, Spock, I think you for preventing me from doing something stupid. There would have been two of us in Jim's condition, and I definitely think that is something to be avoided."

"Thanks," Kirk quipped.

Saavik had been watching the by play with comprehension. She ventured her mystification in one word, "Humans!"

"Indeed," Spock added.

"You'll live," McCoy said as he and Spock helped Kirk to a sitting position. "Uhura, do you think you can get us some food in here?"

"I believe so, Doctor. And I think the local beverage with meals is beer. Do you want some?" Uhura asked.

"Now that would go down right well," McCoy agreed as she ducked out of the tent.

"I must return to our host," Spock said starting to rise.

"First, let me look at your left hand," McCoy said putting a restraining hand on the Vulcan's arm.

Spock raised an incredulous brow at him.

"Jim doesn't bleed green, and there were green stains where you were supporting him. After his sacrifice to maintain your cover, don't blow it."

Spock opened his hand and stared down in astonishment at the crescent cuts in his palm.

"I figured as much," McCoy said as he applied a modern astringent to stop the oozing flow. "You nearly crushed my shoulder, you know."

"Spock, these emotional displays..." Kirk began.

"...are obviously a sign of my weakened condition," Spock said with finality.

"And what of my designation of sister-wife?" Saavik broke in, taking the opportunity to voice her consternation.

"That was done simply to protect you from unwanted advances," the Vulcan explained. "Now I must return to our host. Saavik, I believe it would be best if you remained with the others. This is a hunting camp, and you would be without peer."

"Agreed," she said, collecting a double-take from Kirk and McCoy.

Uhura entered with flat bread and some kind of roast fowl on a tray and a crockery container.

"Ah, good, here comes the beer," Kirk observed.

Uhura nodded.

"For medicinal purposes only, Captain."

"Of course, Doctor," Kirk agreed heartily.

Spock barely restrained himself from shaking his head as he left the tent to join the hunters.

The members of the hunting party had settled down for the evening meal. Narmer motioned Spock to a place next to him and offered him beer and bread which he accepted and roast fowl which he refused.

"The bird is not done to your taste?" Narmer asked, not wishing to offend his guest.

"No, it is done perfectly well," Spock assured him, "but I have taken a vow not to taste meat until I have completed my quest."

"A quest?"

"To reach the mouth of the great river," Spock clarified.

"A fool's errand," one called Heb commented.

"How so?"

"It is the land of the cobra; you would not survive," Chem, another hunter added.

"Is Watchet and her family so numerous as to be a threat to life and limb?" Spock asked.

"Ah, no," Narmer laughed, "it is only the two-legged family members who would cause trouble."

"But why should they bother the traveler?"

"You are a stranger coming from the land of Nekhebit; therefore you would be suspect," Heb answered.

"How so? I have done nothing to earn their distrust."

"Some years ago, in the days of my father, Wab, who wore the white crown, he gathered an army to conquer the nomes of the north. Before the army marched, he sent spies and other north to convince the populace not to fight. It was a near thing, but Wab was overconfident. He thought he could move rapidly because of those

he sent before, but the wily old marsh fighter and wearer of the red crown, Aha, rallied the people and Wab fell early in battle. There was no one to continue the fight, so Nekhebit's sons went home. Now traders are restricted to merchant districts in the north and all others are discouraged. Wab was from Uab Nome. That nome and even its god have fallen into disfavor—they even eat fish!" Narmer exclaimed.

"But is not he joining of the two lands a good goal?" Spock asked reasonably.

"Hah! Yes, but that hyena, Men, who now wears the white crown, does not have the courage to spit, much less to win a land in battle," Heb observed.

"He is more interested in collecting his tithe than in the future peace of the land. He would suck the marrow out of his own mother's bones if he thought it would increase his wealth," Narmer exclaimed amid grunts of assent from his companions.

"I should know, he is my half brother. He even levied a tithe on me this past inundation, but I told him to find the goods in his own store house." His voice had risen in anger as he spoke, and his sudden silence rang in Spock's ears like the reverberation of a bell past its toll. Narmer tossed a gnawed bone into the fire and seemed to reset himself. In a conversational tone he asked, "If you are following the river, how came you in from the savannah and the red lands?"

"I was on pilgrimage with my party," Spock answered, taking a tentative sip of the beer and grimacing slightly at its bitter taste.

"Only Set and Anubis hold those lands sacred," Narmer said.

"I was following the path of Osiris and felt a curiosity about the land of the Libyan," Spock said, desperately wishing Uhura had given him more detailed lessons in Egyptian mythology and political geography. "You have noticed that two members of my party are Libyans," he continued. "They joined the household some years past, and I was curious to see if their fantastic stories were true."

"Yes," Narmer recalled, "The chastised slave and the healer. The other is Nubian, is she not?"

Spock nodded.

"Ah, the women are reputed to be a valued prize," said Hotpe with a slow smile.

Spock blushed and took another swallow of brew from the clay cup in his hand. The stuff was not really so bad once you got over the surprise of the flavor. And it was thirst quenching. Besides, refusing the meat was enough of an insult to his host.

"What fantasies have you heard of the western lands?" Narmer continued companionably.

"I would see the field of reeds where Re rests, and the entrance to the underworld. I would see creatures half men and half antelope moving through the fields. I would see the bark of Re float down through the air."

"And did you see all this?" Narmer asked with a smile.

"The animals, yes," Spock replied. "As to the other, we did not travel very far west; perhaps if we had gone further..."

"Perhaps, but I am no priest," Narmer observed. "What is this of Osiris? I have not heard of a journey this far up river."

Oh, no, Spock thought to himself, another change beyond repair. At least Uhura assured me the legend was known in historical times. He took a long draught of his beer, draining the cup, which the serving woman promptly refilled.

"You have heard the tale of how Set tricked Osiris into the decorated coffin, which he threw into the river and which finally came to rest lodged in a tamarisk tree in Byblus," he began, watching his listeners for signs of recognition. Several nodded and encouraged Spock to continue his narrative. He took another sip from his cup as he realized the myth was starting here.

"The sister-wife of Osiris, Isis, went searching for her lost mate and eventually came to Byblus, where she entered the service of Istar. There she revealed herself and removed the body of her husband back across the Great Green to the lower land, where his body was annointed by Anubis and hidden from their enemy,

Set. But Set found the body and dismembered it, scattering the fourteen parts over the length of the land. We are on pilgrimage to see all the resting places of Osiris," Spock concluded.

"But Set and Osiris were brothers," Hotpe objected. "Why should he do ill to Osiris?"

"Because he coveted the wife and the power of Osiris," Spock answered, draining his cup for another refill.

"Truly as you say, friend Sopek," Narmer said clapping Spock on the shoulder, "a worthy quest. Where have you stopped on your journey?"

Spock was ill prepared to answer this question so he decided on a misdirection. "In truth we have just returned from the land of the Libyans and I am not quite sure where we are," he confessed.

"Ah," Narmer said with a laugh, "some explorer you are—like none that has been before."

Spock was perplexed at an unaccountable desire to join in the merriment, as the other hunters had laughed aloud at Narmer's designation. "Please, Narmer, could you enlighten me as to where we are?" Spock asked quickly, hiding behind another gulp of the warm brew.

"You must be from far upriver indeed," Heb chided.

Spock nodded, "Abtu," he responded remembering it was about as far from anything as you could get in Upper Egypt and hoping that this was not a neighboring nome.

"Well, then, no wonder you do not know Narmer, Nomarch of Tashe, brother to Men, wearer of the White Crown, who resides at Ermenhert," Chem exclaimed.

"I think a delegation has not been sent that far in my lifetime," Narmer added.

"I make my residence at Shet, and you and your party are welcome to join me there and take refreshment," he offered.

"Then we are not far from Mennefert," Spock exclaimed and was chagrined to find himself hard pressed to restrain a belch. "That was our next stop, the resting place of the backbone of Osiris." He took another sip of beer to quiet his suddenly queasy stomach.

"Ah, yes, friend Sopek," Narmer said expansively. "I can give you letters to friends to assure hospitality in the big city. Surely the gods were with you guiding you this far down the river. But for now, we must call it a night, for we must rise with Re in order to travel in the cool of the morning. Sleep well."

"I thank you for all your kindnesses," Spock said, tossing down the last of his beer. He started to rise but found himself so unsteady that he would have fallen back had he not grabbed the proffered arm of Hotpe. "Excuse my clumsiness," he apologized, "I suffered a chance head injury, and do not seem to be fully recovered." He gained his feet but the world refused to stay still.

"Do you need assistance to your tent?" Narmer asked in concern.

"Thank you, no," Spock said waving him off and taking what he hoped appeared to be a firm step away from the fire.

"As you wish," Narmer answered, settling into a blanket at the fireside.

As Spock made his staggering progress toward the tent, he heard one of the hunters make a sniggering remark about "Such an explorer—was ever the like." He leaned down to enter the tent and fell in head first on top of Saavik, who had been watching and listening to the campfire conclave.

"Spock, are you ill?" she said in alarm.

McCoy took one whiff, "Phew! I thought Jim and I drank a lot of beer this evening trying to dull the day!" he exclaimed.

"Doctor!" Spock protested, and promptly hiccupped. What was the matter with him?

"Spock, you're soused," Jim said in teasing amusement.

"Captain, I do not overindulge," he said in an attempt at indignation, which was completely spoiled by another hiccup.

"Now, you all listen to your old country doctor," McCoy said, putting on his best Southern charm as he helped Spock to a sleeping mat and placed a blanket over him. "First, the beer here has a much higher alcohol content than anything I have ever tasted by that name. Second, any alcohol would affect you more strongly than usual because of your head injury."

Spock fervently wished the interior of the tent would stop spinning, and he found that closing his eyes made it worse. "I seem to be paying dearly for my lack of information," he said thickly between hiccups.

"Just wait until tomorrow morning," McCoy hinted darkly.

Kirk chuckled. "Spock, we'll have a contest to see who feels worse, but for now let's try to get some sleep."

"We are to leave at first light," Saavik informed them, and rolled in her blanket.

One by one the Federation people's breathing deepened as they drifted into sleep under the protection of the Egyptian gods.

XIV

The sky had barely turned the ashes of roses color that precedes true dawn when stirrings in the camp roused Kirk from his fitful slumber. He tried rolling on his back and instantly was aware of his error. "Ow!" he exclaimed, now fully awake.

McCoy rose next with a start, having kept a doctor's ear on his patients during the night. "Jim, are you all right?" he asked in concern.

"If being stiff and sore qualifies as all right, then yes, but I'll never get used to sleeping face down on the hard ground."

"You'll need to for a while," Uhura said sleepily, with a stretching yawn.

"Must you chatter so loudly this early," Spock mumbled from his pallet.

"How do you feel?" McCoy asked.

"Aside from being somewhat nauseous and having a brain which feels three sizes larger than its container, rather well," Spock answered a shade peevishly. "Do you have anything amid your rattles and potions that would settle an upset stomach?"

McCoy shook his head, "Only advice—don't overindulge again."

"I shall endeavor not to, and I do believe this is a unique day," Spock rejoined.

McCoy raised a brow in excellent mimicry of a Vulcan manner.

"I ask for assistance and you admit to being unable to give it," Spock said.

Further interchange was prevented when Saavik entered the tent. No one had yet noticed she was missing. "I have brought breakfast," she announced, placing a large crock of porridge in the central clearing, and laying bowls and fruits next to it. Spock looked distinctly greener than usual, but the three Humans quickly huddled around the food. "We break camp in thirty minutes," she said ladling the boiled grain into the bowls and passing them around. "We are expected to carry the mats and tents we used."

"Oh," Kirk groaned, "Can't I play royalty today?"

"Not unless you suddenly grow pointed ears," McCoy said. "You can carry the roll of mats on your shoulder."

"Thanks. Say, how do you eat this stuff, anyway?" Kirk asked after a futile search for a spoon or other eating implement.

"Like this," Uhura demonstrated by dipping her first two fingers in the porridge and conveying some to her mouth.

"Spock, you really should eat something," Saavik said, noting his untouched bowl. "The fruit is quite good and the porridge is palatable, although somewhat lumpy, and made from the same grains as the beer."

Spock paled noticeably, but with his customary Vulcan control managed not to race from the tent. He did nibble at the fruit. The porridge, for this day at least, remained untouched.

The tent was pulled down and the mats rolled in short order. McCoy had to assume one of the back packs, so Saavik was given the med kit to carry and Spock slung the carry bag over his shoulder. Narmer waved him to his side at the head of the march. The rest of the Federation party took position in the middle of the line of march behind several of the older warriors. They were followed by the serving women and trailed by the younger hunters. All of the Egyptians of the party carried the meat preserved from the hunting. The pace set was six kilometers per hour, fast but steady for the heavily burdened people. They headed for the green forest marching into the sun.

"I look forward to returning home," Narmer said conversationally.

"My home is so far away I am not sure I shall ever see it again," Spock said.

"At least you have your wife with you. My beloved Wia always came on hunting parties with me," Narmer sighed.

"She is with Osiris?"

"If she is, I would beat her within an inch of her life," Narmer laughed. "No, she is large with our third child. The first two were girls, praise Hathor. Now I wish to bless Apis too and have a son. Do you have children?"

"None."

"Too bad. They assure your place with the gods."

"Perhaps when I am through with my pilgrimage," Spock conceded.

"Don't wait too long. They must be old enough to perform service to the gods."

"As you say."

They walked on in companionable silence for a time. The rocky ground and touch, pale grass of the savannah had given way to waist-high, thicker grass and some small trees. Everywhere the sounds of life beckoned to one another through the entire animal kingdom—insects and cold blooded creatures, birds and mammals invited their opposites to end their loneliness. Other cries bespoke territorial and mating disputes, and occasionally there was heard the despairing scream of the prey and hungry note of the predator. It was the season of the inundation, the spring of Egypt's three seasons when the mighty Nile overflowed her banks and deposited the rich silt which formed the fertile base for the agriculture of the river basin. It was not a time for farming, but rather for hunting and building and war.

Not missing a stride, Narmer smoothly knocked an arrow into his bow. Then he turned and drew so quickly that Spock barely had time to ascertain the target and put his hand on the bowstring to prevent the arrow's flight.

"You stop me from dispatching a vile dog?" Narmer said indignantly. "It has been following at a distance since midmorning."

"It is my companion," Spock answered mildly.

"Dogs are good for nothing."

"Do you not use them for hunting aids?" Spock asked in amazement. "Where I came from, it is common practice."

"No good can come from any dog. Have you named it?"

"She is called Set."

Narmer laughed aloud. "A perfect name for such an animal—the god of chaos and destruction and drunkenness. Yes, an apt companion for you, friend Sopek, at least for last night." The Egyptian winked at Spock.

Spock thought of several rejoinders, but decided against saying anything lest he offend his host.

"Very well, Set can keep us company, as long as it does no harm," Narmer said.

XV

The deep green line of the forest slowly drew nearer. Also growing more distinct was a whisp of gray smoke rising straight up on the windless day. The Egyptians speculated among themselves that the village had been informed of their



return by the herders and were preparing a feast—perhaps a young hippo had been mired from the size of the cook fire. On one of the infrequent stops the Federation people discussed the sing, and decided not to name their conclusion—the fire had nothing to do with cooking. But their hosts displayed increased agitation and stepped up the pace twice, even after entering the forest, explaining that they could reach their village at sunset at this rate. "To sleep tired in one's own bed is a good thing," Narmer declared.

The last two kilometers were done at a job. The smoke had thickened and lay close to the ground like a blanket of acrid fog. The party broke from the trees to beyond the village a smoldering ruin. The few standing structures were of a rectangular bundled reed construction. Most of the fired buildings had burned to ash. Narmer staggered forward in shock and grabbed the first person in reach.

"Hotep, what happened?" he cried, shaking the man until his teeth rattled.

"Lord, a raid," Hotep gasped when he could shake out the words.

Narmer released the man and passed a hand over his eyes. "Who could have done such a thing? Did you see who it was—why?"

"I did see, Lord. The band of marauders was led by one wearing the white crown."

"And you, of course, hid—did you hide in a brick oven?" Narmer asked, regarding the soot ground into the other man's knees and arms.

"Please, sir, they attacked after entering the village as friends. There was no time for defense. Wia had gone to greet him."

"Wia—where is she?"

"Taken."

"Oh, Gods. My children, Nefret and Wabe, what of them?"

"They tried to stop the men from taking their mother; both were struck down. I have not seen them since," Hotep whispered in fear of the look on his lord's face.

It was too much for Narmer. He fell to his knees with a groan. "Wia, my daughters, my village," he said hollowly as tears traced a gully down the trail dirt on his face.

Spock stepped forward and lifted Narmer to his feet. Putting an arm around the man's waist and drawing one arm over his shoulder for support he said, "Come, let us find the children. They may yet live."

Narmer walked as if in a stupor from group to group of survivors. Each family had its own sorrow to tell, of persons taken for slaves or members killed. Narmer muttered what comfort he could from the depths of his own pain. Finally, they came upon a serving woman carrying water to a tent.

"Oh, sir, I am so glad you are back. I have done what I could, but Wabe died instantly and Nefret is so hurt," she broke down and sobbed, leading them to the tent and drawing the flap back. In one corner lay a small bundle completely covered by a linen wrap. In the middle of a stack of mats covered by a linen sheet lay a girl of about ten. She was a study in contrast of black and white. Her raven hair framed a face as white as her covering. Even her lips had no color. The Vulcan gently drew the covering back as Narmer knelt to take the child's cold hand in his. Spock's mouth tightened as he saw the blood soaked bandage covering one shoulder and the upper third of her body. She had taken a sword slash on her shoulder. The girl's eyes fluttered and opened—the only sign of life she gave, so shallow was her breathing.

"Father—I tried to stop them" she whispered in breathy gasps. "Mother was crying. Wabe screamed." A tear poured from a corner of the child's enormous dark eyes.

"Hush, Nefret," Narmer answered. "You did just fine; you are my brave home guard." Nefret signed and the corners of her mouth turned up as she closed her eyes and drifted off from the exhaustion of speaking.

The two men left the tent—Narmer drawn by the duty of a leader to his people and Spock to see what help he could offer.



BB

"She has a death on her," Narmer said brokenly, as they headed back to the others.

"Perhaps my servant, the physician McCoy, can help," Spock said hopefully.

"She was my first born. She always wished she could have led the people after me. I had explained she was the home guard—." Narmer's voice broke.

"May I have McCoy look at her?"

"Very well, he could do her no more harm. I tell you one thing, friend Sopek, a head will roll from under the white crown. Men knew the hunters would be away—I invited him to join us. He will pay for this and his bones will feed the jackals."

"But he is your brother," Spock objected.

"I have no brother, only an animal who used to eat at my father's house, ever gluttonous like swine. His will be death without hope of life. This I promise." Narmer's voice had turned cold in making his vow, and Spock understood the next action of the community would be vendetta.

Spock found McCoy, as he knew he would, tending to the injured. He brought him to Nefret's tent and left him there cursing at the butchers who could do this to a child. He then went to help salvage and rebuild what the village could. Rest for the weary travelers was long in coming and all too short.

XVI

At sunrise, Narmer called the nome council. Another hunting group had come in, providing a total of twenty able-bodied men from this village, and perhaps twice that number from neighboring villages to go after the raiders who numbered perhaps a hundred.

"We could use all help possible," Narmer declared. "Sopek, what of you and your party?"

Kirk was standing at Spock's back, and gave him an encouraging nudge. Spock understood his captain's desire for action. Logic was useless in their situation, since they still did not know what action would right history. "I offer my hand against your enemy and Kirk's. McCoy, as physician, is needed here. Uhura and Sabi-ka..."

"...Choose to join in hunting mad swine," Uhura said with fire in her eyes.

"If you will have us," Saavik added.

"We welcome women warriors. Tales are told on the river of their savagery, and I expect you to add truth to the stories," Narmer acknowledged. "We move in one hour," he said in dismissal.

Narmer checked on Nefret. She looked no better, but she was still alive. McCoy had insisted that he alone tend her and Narmer agreed, knowing full well that no one in the village could help her. His only desperate hope for her was this foreign physician.

The Federation party did not debate the wisdom of participation in the battle to come. They quietly went about choosing appropriate weapons and protective wear. All selected concealing leather battle helmets and curved wooden shields. Each, however, chose weapons differently—Uhura wielded a lance, Kirk hefted a short copper Egyptian sword, Saavik took a bow and Spock bore a mace. Kirk quipped that Spock's choice was a bit cruder than his usual style, but his first officer pointed out that in close quarters it was as likely to incapacitate the enemy as any of their weapons, yet skillfully wielded would be less likely to kill than any of them. They took their places in the column as it moved out after Narmer. This was still the time of the foot soldier, where there was little distinction between royal and common warrior other than the color of a helmet or the decorations on a weapon.

XVII

The trail was still plain, as the column was moving slowly because of the captives being herded. They had more than a full day's start, but the pursuers expected to catch up by midafternoon. Surprisingly, the sign led toward the red land. Narmer swore softly when he realized that if he had returned to his village ten kilometers to the south, he would have encountered the raiders. He suspected Men had chosen this way as the one surest to enable him to keep an eye on his prisoners and also easiest to travel to his home.

At first, Saavik and the Federation officers kept pace easily with the troop. But as they passed out of the forest and onto the savannah, Spock began to experience double vision again and he began to falter. The others volunteered to stay back with him; until he had sufficiently recovered to catch up. He urged them on saying they were safest if they stayed together in battle and he should not encounter any difficulty this far from the enemy column. Grudgingly they agreed to go on. Spock informed Narmer that he was dropping out for a time because of his old injury, but that he would wield his mace for Nefret before he had guided his bark into the underworld. Narmer wished him well, and Spock selected a spot beneath a tanna tree, and watch his friends double time off to battle. He rested his head on his knees and attempted to meditate. The droning hum of the insects in the rising late morning heat and the still air made him drowsy. When next he was aware of his surroundings it was several hours past midday. His eyes snapped open and he was grateful to see just one of everything. But he would have to hurry to catch up with the others. He rose carefully and stretched his long muscles lest they cramp. A drink from his water pouch and several bites of his travel ration refreshed him completely. He set off at a jog along the path of his companions.

Gradually the grass browned and became sparser as the terrain roughened. Patches of stony ground became larger and closer together. In the distance ahead of him, Spock saw large dark birds wheeling in lazy circles in the azure sky. Bearing in on a predator's kill, Spock thought—or a battle—little difference.

The archer exposed his position to take aim on the running enemy. To kill on a side shot he knew to aim for the ear. But luck was not his, or rather, it belonged to the hunted. Just as he drew the bowstring taut tracking his prey, his food slid on the pebbled ground. His shot went wide, but not wide enough.

The arrow caught Spock in the right knee mid-stride, and the pain shot through him like an electric shock. He tried to keep running but the arrow was lodged behind the patella locking his leg in flexed position. His momentum crashed him to the ground, breaking the shaft and driving the point into bone. Waves of weakness and pain washed over him as he struggled with the green haze clouding his sight, attempting to find his shield and weapons before the stragglers finished him off. Unless someone came back for him he would die on this desert—so red, so much like home.

XVIII

The main party caught sight of the dust of the raider column moving slowly southward. Narmer signaled for his group to split in two and approach the enemy from both sides as they descended into a shallow valley. The Federation group stayed together on the near side and followed Hotpe over the rocky terrain to the crest of the hill. Kirk peered over the edge, and saw the line of captives bound together and being prodded along by the soldiers. He could not make out Wia, but there were many women in the group. Most of the male prisoners bore the wounds of resistance. He estimated about eighty raiders in sight. The others must be scouting ahead or covering...

A shout across the valley alerted Men's soldiers and they herded the captives together. Hotpe gave a battle cry and Kirk and the others found themselves running down the hill into battle. The only way to tell friend from foe in the melee was the yellow sun painted on the helmets of Narmer's men. Kirk encountered his first foe quickly, who was clearly accustomed to hacking, not fencing. Kirk came up under his guard and slid his sword into the man's belly, sending him to sleep with the gods. Uhura's opponent wielded a mace, and did not expect a spear-bearing woman to oppose him. He rushed her with a yell, and at the last minute she dropped to one knee, planting her spear. His momentum drove it through his body. She had to plant her foot on the dead man's back to draw the spear through to retrieve it. Saavik had loosed two very effective arrows, but a warrior grabbed her from behind. She threw him over her shoulder and he fell badly. Something cracked and he was down.

Surprise was on the side of the attackers, and there was no doubt about the outcome. The fighting broke and cleared as Men squared off against Narmer. Only one of Men's men tried to interfere, but he had the misfortune to stand next to Heb. The treacherous one went face down in the dust with a knife between his shoulder blades. The leaders fought with swords. Men was a head taller than Narmer, but he was not in as trim a shape. Narmer had speed and agility to balance his shorter reach. The copper swords rang in the sunlight, heavy strokes nicking the blades of both men. Narmer went into a fierce attack, yelling "For Wabe...for Wia...for Nefret." Men fell back and Narmer pressed harder. A chance stroke cut Men across the sword hand. Narmer caught him on the thigh and finished the kill with a slash across the throat. A cheer went up from Narmer's men.

Saavik moved next to Kirk and touched his arm lightly. "Spock," she whispered. He turned and followed her without question. Uhura saw them and joined in. "Trouble?" she asked. Kirk nodded. "Spock."

XIX

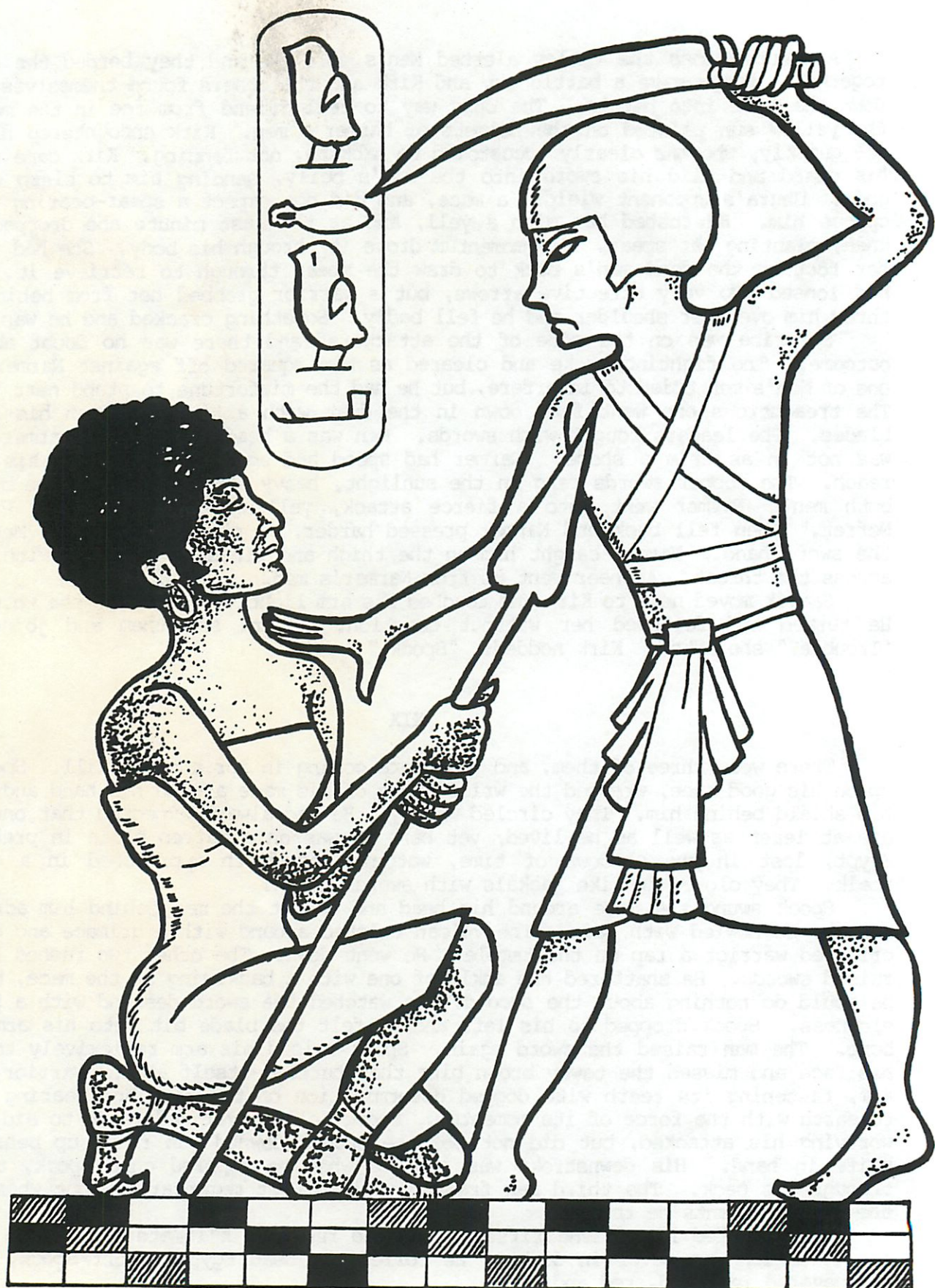
There were three of them, and they were coming in for a close kill. Spock rose up on his good knee, wrapped the wrist thong of his mace around his hand and planted his shield behind him. They circled warily. He had always expected that one should die at least as well as he lived; yet here he was on a barren plain in prehistoric Egypt, lost in the shadows of time, watching as death approached in a cautious stalk. They closed in like jackals with swords drawn.

Spock swung the mace around his head and caught the man behind him across the knees. He howled with pain. The Vulcan twisted around with a grimace and gave the crippled warrior a rap on the temple. He went down. The other two rushed him with raised swords. He shattered the ankle of one with a backswing of the mace, but knew he could do nothing about the second. He watched the sword descend with a terrible slowness. Spock dropped to his left and he felt the blade bit into his arm to the bone. The man raised the sword again. Spock raised his arm reflexively to shield his face and missed the tawny brown blur that hurtled itself at the warrior's sword arm, fastening its teeth with dogged determination on the limb and bearing the man to earth with the force of its momentum. Spock rolled over and tried to aid the dog worrying his attacked, but did not see the second downed man raise up behind him, knife in hand. His downstroke was spoiled when he toppled onto Spock, an arrow through his neck. The third man freed himself of Set momentarily, but when he saw the reinforcements he ran off.

Kirk reached his friend first. They had run five kilometers to reach him and the direction was never in doubt. He rolled the dead Egyptian off Spock, who was now covered in blood, red and green.

"I believe the cavalry has arrived," Spock said in a whisper, before going into a dead faint.

"Uhura, Saavik, give me a hand," Kirk yelled.



186

After they had determined the extent of his injuries, Saavik went off in search of lengths of wood to make a stretcher. Uhura and Kirk washed Spock's wounds and bound them with cloth taken from the dead men. They decided to let McCoy deal with the arrow in the knee.

"The bandages will be the wrong color when we reach the others," Uhura observed.

"Always practical—but you're right. Soak some strips for a top layer. There is plenty of blood to go around.

"Will these do?" Saavik called, coming across a rise, dragging two twisted six foot poles.

Uhura looked up from her grisley chore. "They look fine, but what can we sling between them? There isn't enough left of the enemy clothes." She looked down at her tunic, made a quick decision and stripped it off. "Sir, I realize I am now out of uniform, but Mr. Spock needs this more," she quipped with a smile. "Besides, as you have seen, Egyptian servants often work naked." She slipped the tunic over the poles. "Just get us back to the village before night and the temperature falls.

Kirk and Saavik eased Spock's unconscious form onto the makeshift stretcher. Saavik and Uhura took the Vulcan's feet and Kirk took the head end of the stretcher. They rose and headed off for the village. Set had sat quietly by, gravely watching the proceedings until the party moved off. Then she got up and trotted off into the wastes.

XX

The Federation party arrived at the village just as the sun was setting. Spock had not regained consciousness, nor had the main party returned. Narmer sent word that they were moving slowly and camping, because the noncombatants could not stand an additional forced march. He added that he would return as soon as he could.

Kirk sought out McCoy, who was still with Nefret. They set up their tent nearby so McCoy could tend both patients. Nefret was holding her own, and the doctor was more hopeful about her chances. McCoy checked over Spock's injuries. The arm wound was closing nicely, but the knee was beginning to fester. The arrow would have to be removed immediately. Everyone assisted in setting up the test for the operation, and Spock's knee was propped up on a pile of linen.

"Ah, no, damn," McCoy cursed softly.

"What's wrong?" Kirk asked.

"For one thing, my patient is awake."

"Hello, Doctor," Spock said weakly on cue.

"How do you feel?" Kirk inquired.

"Unwell, but not in any serious distress."

"Well, you are going to be in serious distress," McCoy said angrily. "I don't have nearly enough pain killer in the med kit for this operation. I had to use it all for you earlier and Nefret. And the power pack is drained on my laser scalpel, so I will have to use the old fashioned kind. And I am not sure I have enough antibiotic left to be effective—I just didn't expect to have to use so many medical resources without resupply."

"I am sure you will do your usual splendid job," Spock said. "I have more trust in your ability than in technological marvels where my health is concerned."

McCoy was nonplussed. "Why didn't you tell me that before?" he fumed.

"You did not need to hear it before," Spock said simply.

McCoy put his hand on Spock's shoulder in thanks. "I'll use what analgesic I have at the last moment. You other three will have to keep the leg steady. Okay, Spock?"

The Vulcan nodded for the doctor to begin. McCoy unwrapped the dressing and bathed the wound around the arrow to clear the field. He applied pressure to the

shaft to test how fast it was embedded. Spock sucked in a breath but said nothing. McCoy gave him the injection near the site and started to work at loosening the arrowhead from the bone. The only sign Spock gave of what he was feeling was that after ten minutes he broke out in a cold sweat. Uhura helped sponge away the blood. Finally the arrow was freed and Spock dropped off in relief. Kirk turned his head and looked directly into the horrified face of Narmer.

"What manner of being, devil or god, is he?" he whispered in shock.

Kirk glanced back at Spock and noted the damning pointed ears were now uncovered, and the blood on his leg and soaking the cloths was green.

"My lord, he is only a little different from you and I," he began.

McCoy took in the situation at a glance and put down the leader's panic. "If you want me to use my magic to make Nefret well, you will sit down and say nothing until I am through."

Narmer complied, though still dazed. McCoy dressed the knee and replaced Spock's head cloth. He turned to the Egyptian. "You must forget what you have seen."

"A man who bleeds green. I have never seen the like, nor shall I forget should I live to see a thousand inundations," he replied fervently.

"You must, and we can help you," McCoy insisted.

"How?"

"Sabi-ka can help you."

"I can't!" she protested quickly.

"What do you mean?" Kirk asked. "Haven't you ever done a mind meld?"

"I have never done a mind touch with a human."

"So?" McCoy asked.

"I do not have much training—I can't."

"You can't—or you don't want to?" Kirk pressed.

"I have had trouble," she said in a small voice.

"Serious?" Uhura asked.

"Not to the other, but a Human is so different."

"There is a first time for everything," Kirk observed. "And we can't ask Spock to do this."

"Very well," she said reluctantly as she knelt before Narmer. "This will not hurt," she reassured him as she reached out to touch his face. He shied away, but she took his hand and put it to her face positioning her fingers on the nerve points. "My mind to your mind," she whispered. Then, "Forget."

Slowly she lowered her hand and backed away. Narmer's glazed expression gradually cleared and he passed his hand across his face. "Forgive me, the day has wearied me so, I seem to have dozed momentarily. Will Sopek be all right?"

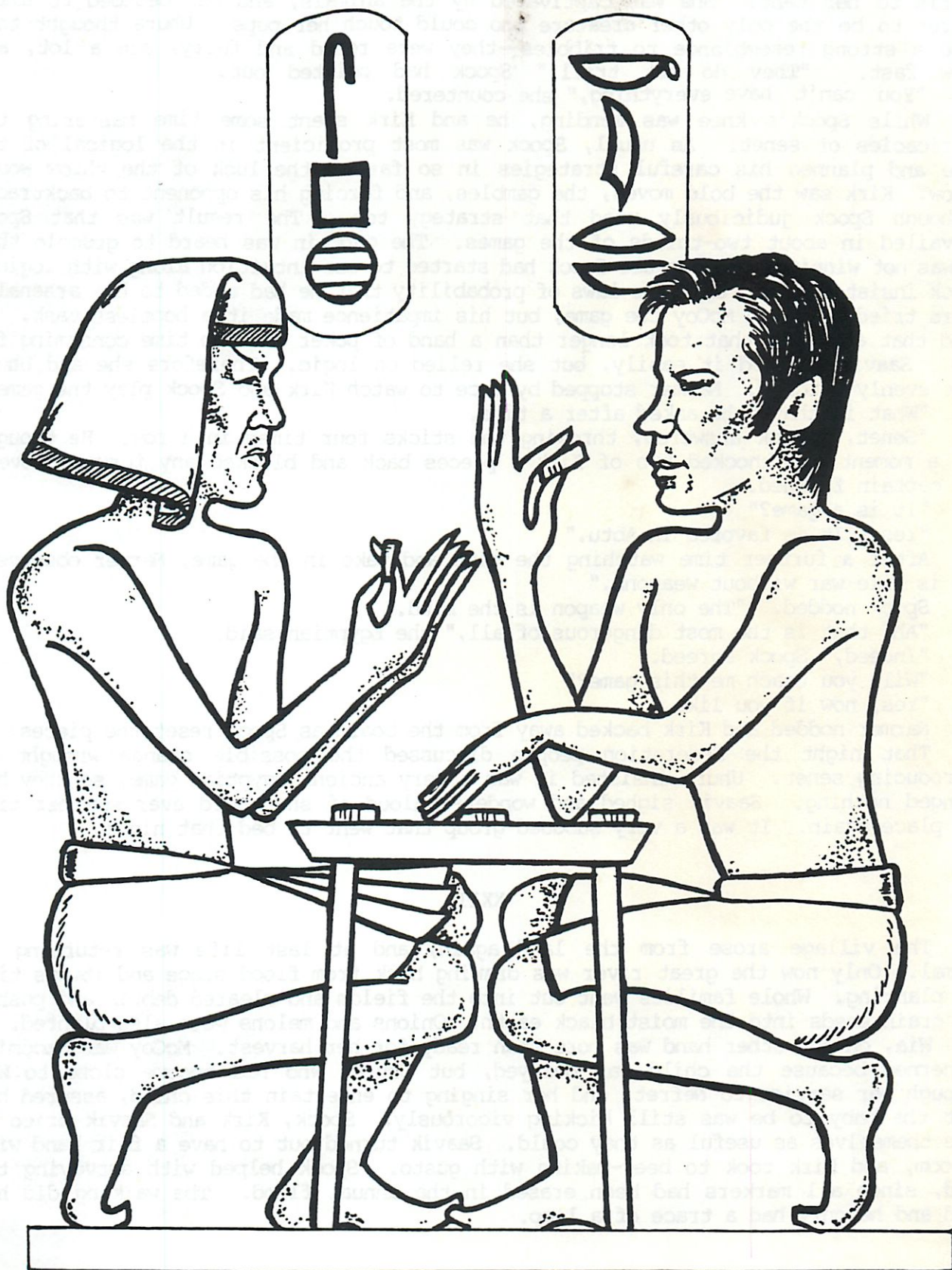
"Just fine," McCoy answered. "And I think Nefret will be up and about in a week."

"Her life is a gift to me. Wia is also safe. We must have a feast to celebrate. But for now, rest," Narmer said as he left the tent.

The others settled down to sleep and missed the tawny shadow that moved in under the tent flap. Set sniffed over Spock ending with a lick to his face. Then she curled up next to his chest in the crook of one arm.

XXI

The captured villagers returned the next day. Wia was a lovely, middle-aged woman looking much like an older version of Nefret. McCoy guessed she was about a month from term, but she seemed to bear the death of a child and captivity with quiet dignity. The villagers busied themselves with rebuilding and replacing lost supplies and furnishings.



Spock found the loyalty and companionship of Set tripled when he awoke, for she was cleaning two mud brown balls of fur. He had to bear McCoy's teasing about his family, but Spock was the only one who could get close to the puppies when Set was around. To amuse Nefret during her convalescence, Spock brought Set and Isis and Osiris to her tent. She was captivated by the animals, and Set decided to allow Nefret to be the only other creature who could touch her pups. Uhura thought they bore a strong resemblance to tribbles—they were round and furry, ate a lot, and grew fast. "They do not trill," Spock had pointed out.

"You can't have everything," she countered.

While Spock's knee was mending, he and Kirk spent some time mastering the intricacies of senet. As usual, Spock was most proficient in the logical of the game and planned his careful strategies in so far as the luck of the throw would allow. Kirk saw the bold moves, the gambles, and forcing his opponent to backtrack, although Spock judiciously used that strategy too. The result was that Spock prevailed in about two-thirds of the games. The captain was heard to grumble that he was not winning more because Spock had started to use intuition along with logic. Spock insisted it was only the laws of probability that he had added to his arsenal. Uhura tried to teach McCoy the game, but his impatience made it a hopeless task. He said that any game that took longer than a hand of poker was too time consuming for him. Saavik learned it easily, but she relied on logic. Therefore she and Uhura were evenly matched. Narmer stopped by once to watch Kirk and Spock play the game.

"What is that?" he asked after a time.

"Senet," Spock answered, throwing the sticks four times in a row. He thought for a moment and knocked two of Kirk's pieces back and blocked any forward move. The captain frowned.

"It is a game?"

"Yes. It is favored in Abtu."

After a further time watching the give and take in the game, Narmer observed, "It is like war without weapons."

Spock nodded. "The only weapon is the mind."

"Ah, that is the most dangerous of all," the Egyptian said.

"Indeed," Spock agreed.

"Will you teach me this game?"

"Yes, now if you like."

Narmer nodded and Kirk backed away from the board as Spock reset the pieces.

That night the Federation people discussed the possible change wrought by introducing senet. Uhura insisted it was a very ancient Egyptian game, so they had changed nothing. Saavik sighed and wondered aloud if she would ever see her time and place again. It was a very subdued group that went to bed that night.

XXII

The village arose from the land again, and at last life was returning to normal. Only now the great river was drawing back from flood stage and it was time for planting. Whole families went out into the fields and cleared debris and pushed the grain seeds into the moist black earth. Onions and melons were also planted.

Wia, on the other hand was more than ready for her harvest. McCoy was becoming concerned because the child was delayed, but Uhura, who had become close to Wia through her service to Nefret, and her singing to entertain this child, assured him that the baby to be was still kicking vigorously. Spock, Kirk and Saavik tried to make themselves as useful as they could. Saavik turned out to have a fair hand with a loom, and Kirk took to beer-making with gusto. Spock helped with surveying the land, since all markers had been erased in the annual flood. The walking did him good and he only had a trace of a limp.

At last the planting was done—a perfect time to honor Nut with a feast, and maybe the birth of a son, Narmer added. The villagers decided on a grant banquet, inviting the surrounding communities to share the return to everyday life. Only a hippo would feed so many mouths, and besides, a hippo hunt was good fun. The harpoons were prepared and ropes twisted and spliced. Men and women gathered and bundled reeds for the one-man river boats and the floats that would bring the beast home. The men would also be armed against the denizens of the shore, the crocodiles, snakes and carnivores. Saavik asked permission to join the hunt, which was granted provided she stay on the shore. Narmer honored Spock by asking him to join the harpooners on the river. He protested that he had little experience because the people of Abtu found their river too rough for the little reed boats, but the Egyptian scoffed at the idea that he would be incapable for handling the craft. Children could and did ride the river all the time. With some misgiving, Spock acceded.

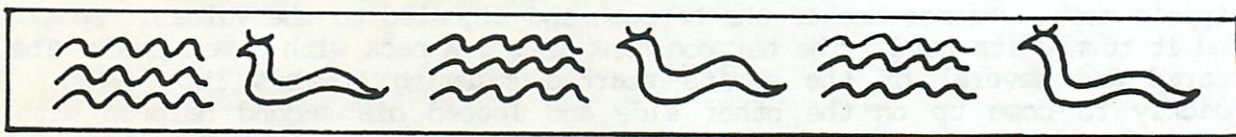
The day of the hunt dawned with the burning gold disk of the sun quickly heating the land early in the morning. The whole village seemed to have joined the sultry trek to the river's edge, bearing boats and ropes, harpoons and weapons. The captain was assigned to the party that would land and butcher the dead hippo. He envied his friend's easy job, and reflected that if rank had its privileges, Spock was certainly getting his turn. There was a break in the foliage and suddenly the great river lay before them like a giant green ocean. The far shore looked like a misty island. Reeds and water plants choked the banks and shallows and the noise of the local fauna rose in cacaphony of squeals and cries, grunts, clicks and buzzes. "Hippo!" one of the front men shouted and pointed to the left. A herd of some eight of the beasts rumbled and spouted and spread their jaws wide with a roar in the waters just beyond the shallows.

"What good luck," Narmer shouted. "Come, friend Sopek, we should have our dinner by midday." He grabbed his boat and equipment and headed for the river's edge.

Spock followed somewhat less enthusiastically. The thrill of the hunt did not lure him, and the reed boat seemed a fragile platform from which to hunt such large animals. Narmer had already put his craft in the water and had launched himself a few feet out from shore. He demonstrated to Spock how to propel the boat from a standing position by rocking the boat back to front with a pumping action. Turns were executed by leaning the body in the direction opposite the turn. Spock crouched at the rear of his boat and pushed off. Gingerly he stood and tried a few tentative rocks. The craft slid through the water easily. Bolder now, Spock practiced several turns and gained confidence in the buoyancy and capabilities of his craft. When he felt secure enough he nodded to Narmer and they headed toward the hippos.

They approached slowly, barely rippling the surface of the water. They only needed a small animal; Narmer saw a juvenile at the edge of the herd and pointed it out to Spock. He readied his first harpoon and slipped quietly to the left of the beast. A small one was still 1000 pounds of dangerous animal when wounded. Spock's job was to attract the animal's attention so the harpoon could be planted in the hippo's neck. Narmer cocked the harpoon and signaled to the Vulcan. Spock shouted and it turned its head. The harpoon sank into its neck with a wet thud. The animal roared and several of the adults started swimming towards it. Narmer circled quickly to come up on the other side and loosed his second harpoon with deadly accuracy. Both were attached to floats. He yelled to shore for the crew to get ready to retrieve the prize.

Narmer was intent on the wounded hippo which was heading shoreward as he should. He missed the submerged log that appeared to be floating toward him, only it was moving against the current. Spock saw it and shouted a warning, but too late. The log rose up under Narmer's boat revealing a four meter crocodile which pitched the Egyptian into the water. It dove after him. The water thrashed and



192

roiled and after a minute Narmer broke the surface of the water screaming for help and went down.

Spock paused only long enough to draw the obsidian hunting knife Narmer had given him, then dove after his friend, hoping fervently the blade would be sharp enough to pierce the leathery hide. Man and beast were hard to miss even in the murky water. The Egyptian was struggling fiercely for air and for shore and the croc was working in the opposite direction. Spock knew enough to avoid the lashing tail and kicked strongly to bring him over the animal's back to the point where he could reach the croc's jaws. He wrapped his legs around the beast's midsection, grabbed on and began to force the lower jaw down. The beast twisted and writhed, but it was no match for Vulcan muscle. As soon as Narmer was free and moving off Spock let the mouth snap shut. He held it shut with one hand while he slashed at the hide of its throat with the obsidian blade. There had to be an offering to the other Nile predators. The animal thrashed frantically and spun in the water smashing its tormentor into the river bottom. Finally the blade cut through; Spock released his hold and swam rapidly for shore.

He rose in the shallows and found Narmer sagging on all fours not three meters from him. Spock waded over and lifted the Egyptian from the water carrying him in to shore. He turned once to see the river turn a boiling red as the other crocodiles moved in to finish their wounded companion. Spock staggered through the papyrus reeds and lotus flowers with his burden.

Saavik had been the nearest member of the hunting party, and had watched the river drama with fascinated horror. Now she rushed to aid her mentor. Spock seemed only bruised, but Narmer was bleeding from wounds on the arm and chest.

"Get him to McCoy," Spock gasped when Saavik reached him.

"But you need..."

"I'll follow; he needs help fast," Spock insisted.

She lifted Narmer easily and started off with a worried glance back at Spock. His color was that of a fish belly and he seemed uncoordinated, but he was moving. She looked down at her burden—probably water in the lungs, severe blood loss, shock—she increased her pace.

Spock watched Saavik move off in relief. There was time; Narmer could be helped. The world doubled and he felt distinctly unwell. His right leg seemed unwilling to obey his orders. Something broke and he almost heard the green tide rush to obscure his vision. And he was falling.

Kirk was with the work party 500 meters away, but Narmer's shout had drawn everyone's notice. He saw Spock dive into the water and he took off. The shore flora made foot travel difficult; Kirk felt like he was moving in slow motion. He was still 300 meters off when Spock emerged from the water, but he kept on. Saavik came for Narmer and moved away. Then he saw Spock fall and something went cold inside him. He frantically began fighting his way through the undergrowth.

Suddenly a five meter crocodile rose out of the water and moved up the bank toward the fallen Vulcan, jaws agape. Kirk was not going to get there in time and he had no weapon that would do any good at this distance. He cried out in despair, "Spock!"

Saavik heard him and turned. She was as far away as Kirk. "No!" she screamed.

The crocodile widened its smile to seize the unmoving prey when a tawny blur leaped between the now closing jaws with a yelp. The beast jerked back, startled but tasted blood and moved off back to the water to savor its catch. The big animal would keep.

Kirk could not believe what he had witnessed. Surely Set had not sacrificed herself for Spock. Maybe the dog misjudged her jump. But that had bought Kirk the time he needed to reach his friend. He knelt beside Spock and rolled him over into his arms. Blood trickled from the corner of the Vulcan's mouth and from his ears. Oh, my god, Kirk thought.

Saavik knelt next to him. "The others are taking Narmer in. I do not think we have much time here."

Kirk nodded in agony. Together they lifted Spock into a seat carry and set off at a job for the village.

XXIII

Uhura stopped in at Narmer's new house to give Nefret a doll she had fashioned. Nefret and Wia were both there arranging the new mats in the sleeping area. Wia had already begun a garden and planted a fruit tree, which was visible in all its spindly glory.

"Good morning, Lady Wia," she greeted. "I have brought this for Nefret."

"Thank you," the woman said with a pinched smile, as she leaned her heavy body on the doorpost. "Nefret, see what Uhura has."

The child reached for the toy, favoring her injured shoulder only slightly now. She still wore a light bandage, but there would be no permanent damage, McCoy had assured them.

Wia smiled at her daughter fondly. "Soon she will have a real little one to look after."

Uhura picked up the other woman's tense note. "Have you had pains?"

"Yes."

"How long?"

"Since midday, yesterday," Wia gasped caught midcontraction.

"How far apart?"

"Not much," the Egyptian woman admitted. "I wish something would happen, I feel so tired."

"Shall I call the physician McCoy?" Uhura asked in concern.

"What would he know of child birth? It is a woman's thing."

"He is very wise; I think he could help," Uhura answered her.

"Yes, please, I would like some help," Wia gasped again.

Uhura settled Wia on the sleeping mats and rushed to bring McCoy, who was changing dressings on those who were badly wounded in the raid. When he heard about Wia's condition he grabbed his kit and set out at a run. A brief examination told him the child was still all right, but the mother was close to exhaustion. He checked again. Yes, the child was presenting breech. He ordered Uhura to bring water and clean linen. He asked Nefret to sponge her mother's forehead and explained to Wia that he would have to break the water sack and try to turn the baby. She nodded. She had finally given in to the pain, and anything was better than continuing this way. The turning did the trick and in thirty minutes the lusty cries of a newborn filled the house and announced to the village that the population had been increased by one.

"My husband will be pleased," Wia exclaimed. "A son to rule. Thank you."

Nefret's eyes widened. "He is so ugly."

"So were you, little guard. Now you have another to look out for," Wia said.

A commotion arose outside, but instead of well-wishers a runner was borne in by several villagers. "Narmer...attacked by a crocodile...hurt bad," he panted.

Wia started to get up in alarm, but McCoy pushed her back. "You stay put, young lady," he ordered. "You have two young ones to look after." Turning to the villagers he ordered, "Have them bring Narmer to my tent. I must get ready." Grabbing his med kit, he and Uhura exited quickly.

McCoy entered the tent where Narmer lay unmoving. Uhura dismissed the other Egyptians, saying the physician's magic only worked when unobserved. Aside from the lacerations and contusions, there was water in both lung sacs, but the Egyptian was breathing on his own, even if it was with difficulty. McCoy turned him over and pumped as much water out as he could with the old back press method of artificial

respiration. A hypo spray of antibiotic reduced the worry about pneumonia and bandages took care of the teeth cuts. Narmer was in surprisingly good condition considering his ordeal.

A shout outside the tent drew the doctor's attention away from his patient who was now quietly resting. Angry voices were insisting someone could not go in, so he stepped to the entrance. Saavik and Kirk were there with Spock slung between them. One look and McCoy knew Spock's luck had run thin. "Let them enter," he said angrily.

The laid Spock gently down opposite Narmer. McCoy ran his scanner over the still form.

"How is he?" Kirk asked anxiously.

"It is what you suspect, a subcranial hemorrhage," McCoy grunted. He checked several other readings and raised his head bleakly. "If we don't get him to a fully equipped surgery in thirty minutes, he will be dead."

"No," Kirk whispered.

"Captain," Uhura put a gentle hand on Kirk's shoulder.

Saavik looked silently down on Spock's still body, reached out and took his hand in hers. Moisture rimmed her eyes.

"It's not fair," Kirk raged. "He was safe!"

Saavik raised her eyes to meet his. "We had better take him into the woods."

"Are you crazy?" McCoy fumed. "At least let him die in peace."

"No, Doctor, I am not crazy. I am experiencing the recall tingle of the Guardian. We have perhaps ten minutes."

"Well then, what are we waiting here for?" McCoy exclaimed.

Uhura ducked out for a quick goodbye to Wia and Nefret while McCoy gathered his medical equipment. Saavik went to explain to the hunters that Spock needed the magic shade of a certain tree to get well, and they wished her all speed. Hotpe gave her a Horus-eye amulet for Spock, for which she thanked him.

Back in the tent McCoy had just replaced his last instrument in the carry bag when he became aware of being watched. Narmer.

"You are leaving," the Egyptian stated in a weak voice.

"Yes."

Looking over at Spock he continued, "Sopek saved my life and now he is dying."

"Yes," McCoy said around a lump.

"But it is the twenty-first day of the first month of Proyet and only good things can happen."

"A good has come to you this day," McCoy said. "Wia bore a son."

"Ah, Ai Sopek then has entered the world. He will live long..."

"... and prosper," McCoy added.

"I give you these words for Sopek. When you are with him in a quiet place, say 'Turn about, turn about, O sleeper, turn about in this place which you do not know, but I know it...'"*

"I shall keep it in mind."

"Do it!" Narmer insisted trying to raise up.

"As you say," McCoy soothed, easing the man downward and straightening his covering. "Our friends return. We must go."

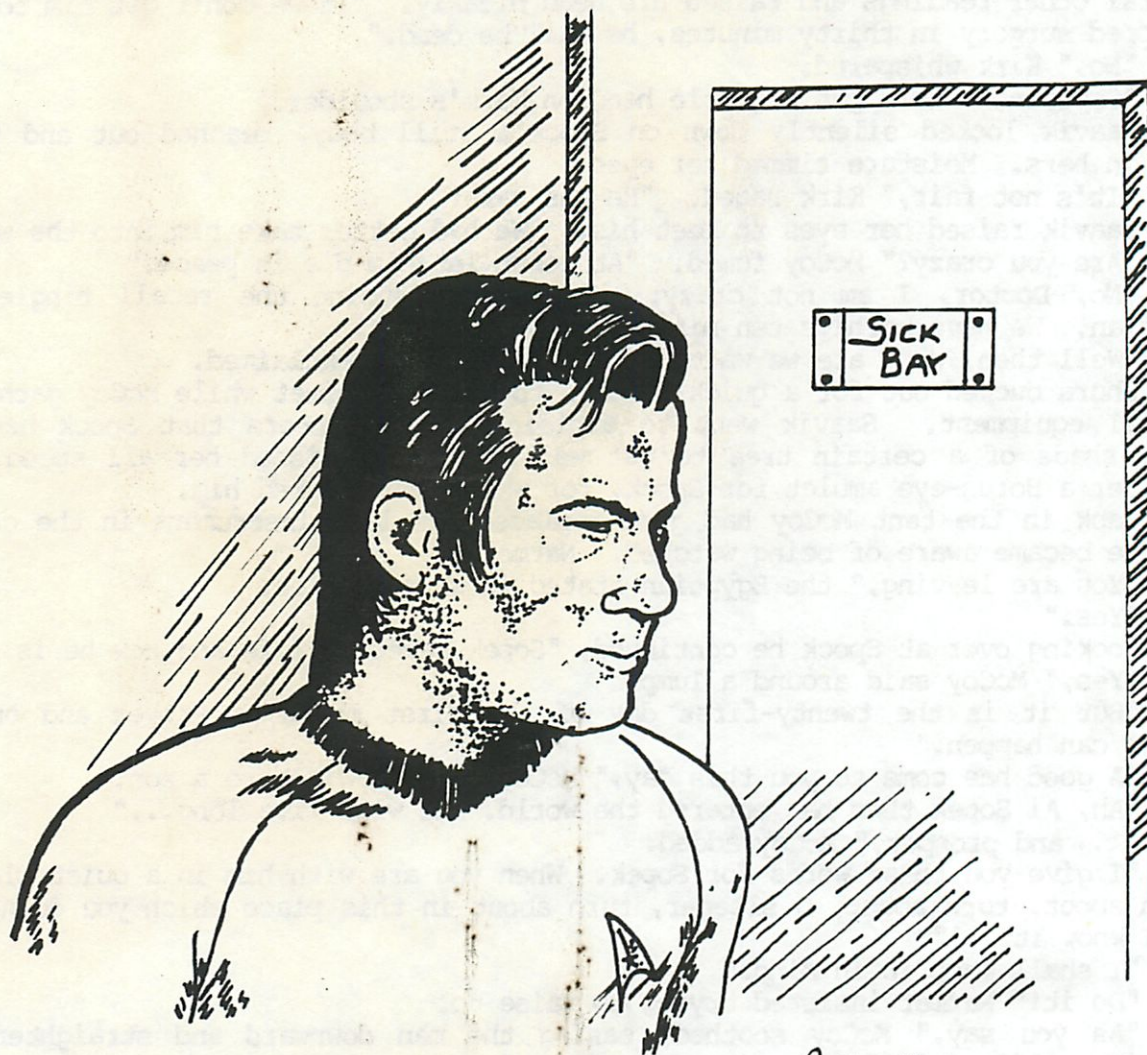
"Remember."

"Good bye, my lord."

"May Re always shine on all of you," Narmer said.

"And on you and your family," McCoy said softly as Kirk and the others entered the tent.

* Spell to Wake the Dead, Coffin Text, Spell 74.



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Hastily a stretcher was prepared for Spock, and they were just out of sight of the village when the transition caught them. Kirk dove for his communicator before the last member of the party, Uhura, had made it through the portal.

"All is as it was before," the Guardian resounded.

"Kirk to Beagle...Kirk to Beagle...Come in Beagle."

"I can show you many time lines to explore," the Guardian continued.

After a delay that seemed like a century a voice responded from the communicator, "Sulu here, Captain. You have only been gone thirty minutes. Was the mission accomplished?"

Ignoring the question he said brusquely, "Five to beam up and send an emergency team to the transporter. Mr. Spock is hurt badly."

"Ay, sir," Sulu answered. The transporter beam took them almost immediately in pillars of fire.

XXIV

Kirk paced the corridor before the small sickbay. He was angry that he could not be with Spock. He was angry that McCoy did not have a private office where he could hide out. He was angry with McCoy because he had shut himself behind those closed doors with the nurse and Spock for two hours. He raised his fist to the taunting metal and abruptly it parted.

"Jim, you better get in here," McCoy said softly, not at all surprised to be facing his friend's upraised fist. The nurse slipped by with a tray of stained instruments.

"How is he?"

"I don't know."

"Will he live?"

"I don't know."

"What the hell do you know then, Doctor?" Kirk raged, grabbing McCoy's tunic in both hands. He looked down at them as if they were things apart. Embarrassed, he slowly loosed his grip.

"An artery burst in his brain. It has been repaired. I do not know the extent of the damage. Spock needs his thought processes to live. Autonomic functions are okay, but I don't know if he has any mind left. The delay—" McCoy's voice cracked and he slumped against Kirk in weariness and anguish over his helplessness.

Kirk steadied his friend. "What can I do?"

"I hope when he becomes conscious, familiar faces will bring him back. I've sent for Saavik, too. She might use telepathic techniques to draw him out."

"When?"

"In a few minutes; I've given Spock an injection to rouse him."

Kirk looked up; Saavik stood at the open door dressed in a black jumpsuit. She had changed in another way, too. She no longer looked young. There were planes and edges to her face that were not there before, and her eyes—her eyes saw too much.

A faint motion drew all three to the Vulcan's bedside. Spock's eyes flew open as if in surprise, but then stared blankly ahead, not noticing anything.

"Doctor, do you mind?" Saavik asked extending her hands toward Spock.

"Go ahead," McCoy said nodding.

"My thoughts to your thoughts," she whispered touching the critical nerve points. "My mind to your mind." She closed her eyes in concentration. Neither human dared even breathe. Then slowly she withdrew her hands. "I thought there was a flicker, but—nothing." Abruptly she turned away.

"That's it then," McCoy said bleakly.

"No."

"Jim, don't."

"No, I can't let it happen," Kirk hissed between clenched teeth.

"Who are you to stop it?" God?" McCoy shot back coldly.

"Not now; it isn't time. It's wrong," Kirk persisted. "We can go back through the Guardian—stop this from happening," he said, grabbing the Vulcan's wrist to lift him from the bed.

McCoy blocked him and forced his hand down. "This is madness, and if you do this, I will not vouch for your sanity. I care about Spock too, and there will be a burning need in my life that will be unmet as well. But your sanity must not buy Spock's life; cannot buy his life."

Both men turned to their fallen companion and each took one of Spock's hands in his own.

"Okay," Kirk sighed.

McCoy remembered the words of Narmer and mentally repeated them. "Turn about, turn about, O sleeper, turn about in this place which you do not know, but I know it..." Silly superstition, but I'll try anything, McCoy thought, knowing it was a vain straw to grab at. He felt infinitely weary.

A blink. "Jim, Leonard," a breath slipped through parted lips—barely audible but sounding like thunder to the other three. Saavik turned, cheeks glistening. Spock removed his hand from McCoy's grasp and reached up to touch her face. "Saavika," he whispered.

"You'll live," McCoy smiled in satisfaction.

"Obviously," Spock said in a stronger whisper. "But then your potions and ministrations have always been noxious enough to raise the dead, Doctor."

"One day you'll be glad to have me around," McCoy warned darkly.

"Spock, Bones—already?" Kirk laughed weakly.

XXV

Later, as the Beagle sped back to Star Base 10 and fled the environs of the Guardian planet, the six Federation members directly involved in the project met for a debriefing. It was a solemn group.

Sulu had been filled in by Uhura on the problems encountered, and had told her privately with a wicked grin that he wished he could have seen Mr. Spock drunk. As for the rest, he was not sorry to have missed that. If Spock noticed Sulu's recent reluctance to look him in the eye, he did not comment. The Vulcan had been out of Sickbay after two days, although restricted to half watches. He exhibited no ill effects except perhaps that his usual deliberate, graceful movements were a shade more controlled. He also admitted that the sickbay was entirely too small for both himself and McCoy. The doctor's hovering attention was sufficient incentive to ensure a speedy recovery.

After a review of the events experienced in the travels through the guardian, Kirk framed the question which obstinately eluded an answer, "Why did your investigations in Pre-Reform Vulcan cause repercussions in Earth history, Saavik?"

"I admit on the surface it does not appear logical, however, in the space time continuum, the probability of one event influencing a totally unrelated event is never zero," she said.

"In other words," McCoy paraphrased, "you don't know."

Saavik looked down and remained silent.

"The time periods do appear to be concurrent," Spock observed.

"Any speculation, Spock?" Kirk asked.

"None, Captain."

"It is possible..." Uhura began, "no never mind."

"Go on," Kirk encouraged.

"Well, it is possible that time is like a river with eddies and currents, and Saavik and Spock washed out in a slightly different place."

"That's ridiculous," McCoy scoffed.

"A different time line," Spock mused.

"However, our orders and my research remain the same," Saavik objected.

"But did the Guardian perhaps misdirect you in the other line," Uhura persisted.

"Then why did all of you have to return to Old Earth?" Sulu protested, "and what was the event that restored history to its proper course?"

"Saving Narmer's life," Saavik said.

"What about Nefret, or helping the child into the world?" McCoy protested.

"It could even have been the introduction of senet or the hunting dog into Egyptian culture," Kirk observed.

"Applying Occam's razor to this discussion about a time eddy makes the speculation appear most improbable," Spock said.

"But there is no simpler alternative available," McCoy objected.

"Not one that we are aware of," Spock persisted.

"I wonder why Osiris is green?" Uhura mused aloud.

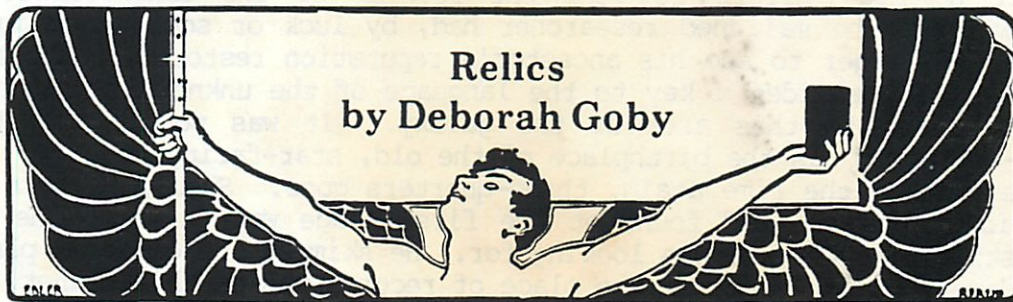
"What?" said Kirk.

"I wonder why Osiris, ruler of the underworld, has always been colored green in antiquity. Could there be an association that Narmer retained from Spock's injury?"

"But I erased the memory," Saavik protested.

"You yourself admitted that you were not a master of the mind meld," Kirk pointed out.

"I guess we'll never know for sure," Sulu said in summary.



He wasn't at all happy about this. The acutely pre-nova sun, lighting this desolate landscape with a red glare, made him nervous and disturbed his concentration. He had been assured that he had at least three days before the nova, barely enough time for his search, but still he was uneasily aware that the malevolent star had already swallowed the first planet and was reaching for the second. Enough, he told himself, think of something else.

Silently he moved across the scorched surface, remembering what he had learned in the course of his training. How, when his people had begun to explore the most distant and tenuous reaches of this arm of the galaxy, they had begun to discover traces of an earlier civilization, a race that had left bits and pieces of itself behind. Not much, a little here, more there, not really enough to put together a picture, but enough to lead his people farther and farther outward.

A sudden flare from the dying sun made him jump and quicken his pace, while his inborn caution made him itch to be gone from this ashy place. Careful, he admonished himself, it isn't always easy to see. He knew that this planet was really too big for a single searcher, but the incipient nova had taken them all by surprise, and he was the only one who could get here in time. Luckily, the preliminary survey had shown only one world in this meager system of eight planets had been hospitable to the people of that ancient culture. Ah, here, he thought, stopping at a likely pile of rubble. He examined the tumbled stones carefully and probed beneath the surface, but it was only another heap of ruins, similar to what had been found on other planets. He hoped that he would find it soon, that he would have time to carefully choose what to take with him.

He recalled that when the theory that this mystery people had explored the stars in primitive starships had been presented, it had cost its propounder his reputation and position. The established authorities had gathered the weight of their knowledge and pronounced that no civilization could possibly have scattered its seeds so widely using such a primitive means of transport. The maverick scientist had been branded a crackpot and did not live to see the discovery of the wrecked starship that had proved him right. He had been eons dead by then.

The searcher checked the time and realized that he had used almost half of the allotted period and still hadn't found what he was looking for. He knew that the length of time he could spend here had been precisely calculated and that to stay for even a short while longer would be foolishly suicidal. He decided that he would end his search early enough to go back to the first place he had stopped at and take what he had found there.

He continued his lonely way over the seared and lifeless planet, moving faster now, but still watching carefully, as he had been trained to do. His people were historians and this was not the first unknown race they had found. They had traced many old cultures, a multiplicity of beings and civilizations that was bewildering in its diversity, and had discovered one thing common to almost all of the peoples who had left their home planets for the stars. Somewhere, sometimes on the world that had given them birth, but somewhere, they left a depository of records and artifacts, protected as well as possible from the ravages of time. As if to say, this is what we were, know us.

The dying star reached out a fiery arm and he wondered anxiously if it would nova sooner than he had been told. Resolutely he pushed the worry aside and continued his search. He remembered how the discovery of the wrecked starship had set off a hasty effort to find the records of the long-forgotten theory. A descendant of the maligned researcher had, by luck or some other agency, kept his records and, eager to see his ancestor's reputation restored, made them available. The notes had provided a key to the language of the unknown star-travelers and led the historians to this area of the galaxy. It was possible that this ruined, burned-out world was the birthplace of the old, star-faring race.

He checked the time again, three-quarters gone. Should he turn back now? No, he decided, what he had found at the first place wasn't worth the chance that he might still find what he was looking for. He skimmed the cindered plains as rapidly as he dared, hoping that, if the place of records was on this planet, it hadn't been buried by some long-ago cataclysm. When he sighted the square black monolith on the horizon, he had less time than he had hoped for, but at least he had found it. He entered quickly, wishing fleetingly that he had others to help when he saw how much was there. He worked as swiftly as he could, sorting through the treasure trove of books and objects, hoping that, among the things he took, would be something indicating the fate of the vanished people. He could read their language, but not easily, and he certainly didn't have time to read now.

A sudden, lurid light made him look towards the ancient star, now appreciably larger and more violently active than when he had first come, to see its monstrous image lit by new and fiercer fires. Now, he knew, he must leave now. He was gathering the chosen items, almost more than he could carry, into an easily transported mass, when his attention was caught by a silvery shape with graceful lines, a model of one of the old starships. He added it to his burden, noting momentarily the lettering on it. A name, he knew, this people had given the ships that carried them starward. He realized that he was carrying more weight than he should, but he could manage, he would manage. He focused his concentration and will, and with the angry flames of the dying star reaching dangerously close to his precious burden, lifted silently from this doomed planet. He didn't know that the name he carried once more to an unknown star was "Enterprise".

He was light years away when the Sun exploded.



